

Veterinary Medical Writing

SECTION EDITORS



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Editorial

December is traditionally a time of reflection, with an old calendar year drawing to a close, a new one just around the corner, and many of us planning to spend the festive period with friends and loved ones. On top of that, 2021 brings to a close our second year living under the shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is, therefore, fitting that reflection is the theme for this issue's article. In it, Henry Smith, our Veterinary Special Interest Group (vetSIG) committee co-chair, describes how he designed and conducted a survey of the group's membership. As the vetSIG is celebrating its

third year in 2021, the time was right to find out who vetSIG members are and what direction they want to steer the group into the future. From a very personal perspective, Henry recounts what he has learned from running the survey and reflects on the survey's exciting and sometimes surprising results.

In the second edition of *From the horse's mouth*, our quarterly news bulletin from the veterinary world, we report how legislation to reduce the number of antimicrobials available for the treatment of veterinary patients has been rejected by the European Parliament and

why this is a victory for One Health, "an approach . . . with the goal of achieving optimal health outcomes recognising the interconnection between people, animals, plants, and their shared environment," according to the CDC website.

(<https://www.cdc.gov/onehealth/index.html>)

Finally, we wish all our readers a very happy and peaceful holiday, and we look forward to seeing you in 2022!

**Louisa Marcombes and
Jennifer Bell**

Surveying a SIG: Profiling EMWA's veterinary medical community

EMWA's Veterinary Special Interest Group (vetSIG) turned three years old this year. There was no birthday party, of course, due to the pandemic; however, we were able to mark the occasion with a questionnaire. This questionnaire took the form of a survey aiming broadly to profile EMWA members currently working in the veterinary field (full- or part-time), and those interested in doing so in the future. As described below, the birthday questionnaire results were informative, but still left a gap in the profile. That gap was swiftly plugged using a shorter follow-up questionnaire, targeted more narrowly at established veterinary medical writers. The results of the two questionnaires were formally reported at our July 2021 quarterly meeting, and the full data are available in the report of that meeting, (please see data availability statement below), but here I will present a more personal viewpoint. In this short essay, I recount my experiences as a survey administrator, and the lessons learned – about EMWA's veterinary community, and about conducting surveys.

Designing the questionnaire

The survey's timing and choice of software were dictated by the terms of my subscription to SurveyMonkey, an audience-research solution provider. The paid subscription offers more options for question format and response analysis, so I was keen to wrap up the data collection and analysis while I still enjoyed access to these features. With little time to lose, I set about canvassing the vetSIG's active volunteers for possible questions to include in our survey, and we quickly generated a rather long list of what can best be described as super-multi-option survey questions. In retrospect, I realise this was a beginner's error by a novice survey administrator. I learned that questions should be created *after* objectives are set and the target audience identified, or else they quickly become unwieldy. The main survey objective originated as a rather vague idea of finding out something interesting from people who do, or may do, some veterinary medical writing (VMW). I managed to achieve a bit more clarity in my mind when one member asked me "You defined what a veterinary medical writer is before starting the survey, didn't you?" I could only answer in the negative, but inside my

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head I was thinking "That's what the survey should do: define the term *veterinary medical writer*!"

With the objectives clearer, a final list of seven questions could be finalised swiftly. Five of the seven questions were orientated towards the main term-defining goal; with these questions I aimed to elucidate areas of work, professional path into veterinary medical writing, current employment status, geographical work locations, and future career goals. Another question asked respondents to rank possible vetSIG meeting topics by preference, and the final question was aimed to solicit general comments through a free-text-entry box.

Distributing the questionnaire

With the questions decided, all I had to do was get our survey to the people we wanted to hear

from. I had some options for widespread distribution. Helpful suggestions from members included some large profession-based communities such as the relevant LinkedIn groups, and as a SurveyMonkey subscription holder, I could have availed myself of a marketing and messaging approach involving a target-audience-finding algorithm. However, a more modest approach seemed better suited to a first attempt to administer a survey. Furthermore, focussing on EMWA members and their immediate contacts seemed more likely to yield information from people who could benefit from our SIG's activities. So, I decided to rely on a digital "word-of-mouth" approach within the EMWA community. I publicised the link to the on-line survey through our SIG's mailing list, and EMWA's monthly Newsblast and social media outlets, inviting members to respond, and share the link with any other potentially interested colleagues. Launching the questionnaire was as simple as pressing a button on my personal software-subscriber web page, and copy-and-pasting the software-generated survey link into invitation mails and social media messages. All I had to do then was sit back and wait for the responses.

Round 1 responses: a diverse community emerges

The survey software was good at providing data updates and graphical breakdowns of the responses in real time, although "in real time" was perhaps a relative concept as the early response rate fell somewhat short of deluge proportions. In fact, it took quite a few pleading e-mails to get the number of respondents into double figures, after which there was a steady trickle to reach a final total of 34 responses.

Even though the wait for responses was agonising at times, I was able to spot some interesting patterns almost right away. My first three definition-orientated questions (work area, professional path, and current work status) had been rather heavily loaded with multiple choice items, to cater for every level of experience I could imagine. However, respondents seemed not to see themselves (solely) in terms of the pre-defined categories and provided a lot of information through additional comments, which allowed me to build up a far more detailed picture than I could have otherwise obtained.

The emerging picture threw up a number of interesting revelations. In the first place, the data intended to define veterinary medical writers showed that ... veterinary medical writers are not easily defined. I had expected to find a sort of mini-EMWA, with people engaged in one of the

work areas I labelled *The Big Three* (regulatory, journal articles, and communications, as I imagine them). Our survey did produce the same Big Three, but the proportions were almost the reverse of what I had expected: journal article-type work came out top (46%), with the comms area second (36%), and regulatory a mere third (25%). Veterinary medical writers also seemed to be inveterate category hoppers, with more than half of the respondents reporting work in multiple areas (thus the percentages adding up to more than 100 percent). In particular, many people described a range of work in the comms area (podcasts, vlogging, website material, etc.); maybe the term I was trying to define should have been "veterinary medical communicator" rather than "veterinary medical writer".

A similarly diverse picture emerged with regard to the professional paths into veterinary medical writing. Our community comprises:

- Veterinarians who have moved from clinical practice into medical writing.
- Veterinarians in clinical practice who do some medical writing as a sideline.
- Veterinarians who move (sometimes repeatedly!) between research and medical writing.
- One or two veterinarians who have (sadly) abandoned medical writing and gone back into practice.
- Research scientists who have moved into veterinary medical writing from fields like toxicology.
- Medical writers who are not veterinarians but do some work in the field (that is the category I belong to).

Of the three other definition-related questions, those related to current work status and future career plans also elicited varied responses. The only exception to this pattern of diversity concerned geographical location: our respondents (mainly EMWA members of course) appeared to be a rather Eurocentric group (Germany and Austria were the most commonly cited locations), with a smattering of members in North America, two members in Asia (one apiece in India and Japan), and an Australian respondent as the sole representative of the entire southern hemisphere.

Unsurprisingly, our diverse group of respondents produced a rather diverse wish list when it came to ranking preferred SIG activities. The survey software provided a sort of weighted



scoring system for the ranked options ("discussing my area of VMW", "discussing other areas of VMW", "career opportunities/ development", "specific VMW training", and "social contact"), but no clear, central tendency emerged. Although the survey was anonymous, the software does allow administrators to correlate the responses to different questions. Seemingly, writers with the most experience in the field were keener to discuss their own or others' areas of veterinary medical writing, whereas those with little or no experience in the field were more interested in careers and training-related activities. Perhaps this is an unsurprising finding (albeit not

statistically tested), but it has already had a direct effect on our SIG. We have prepared a grid for varied speakers and topics for quarterly meetings through 2022, and expanded the workshops the SIG offers to EMWA members (with a new workshop on "One Health" added for the 2021 autumn conference). Of course, it would be impossible to satisfy all

members all of the time, but over the course of a year, I believe the vetSIG truly does have something for everybody.

Round 2: The great species race

Fascinating as these results were, something was still missing. It took a while for the penny to drop,

Do our writers have to contend with pets one day and lab rats the next? Just how exotic is the work of a veterinary medical writer?

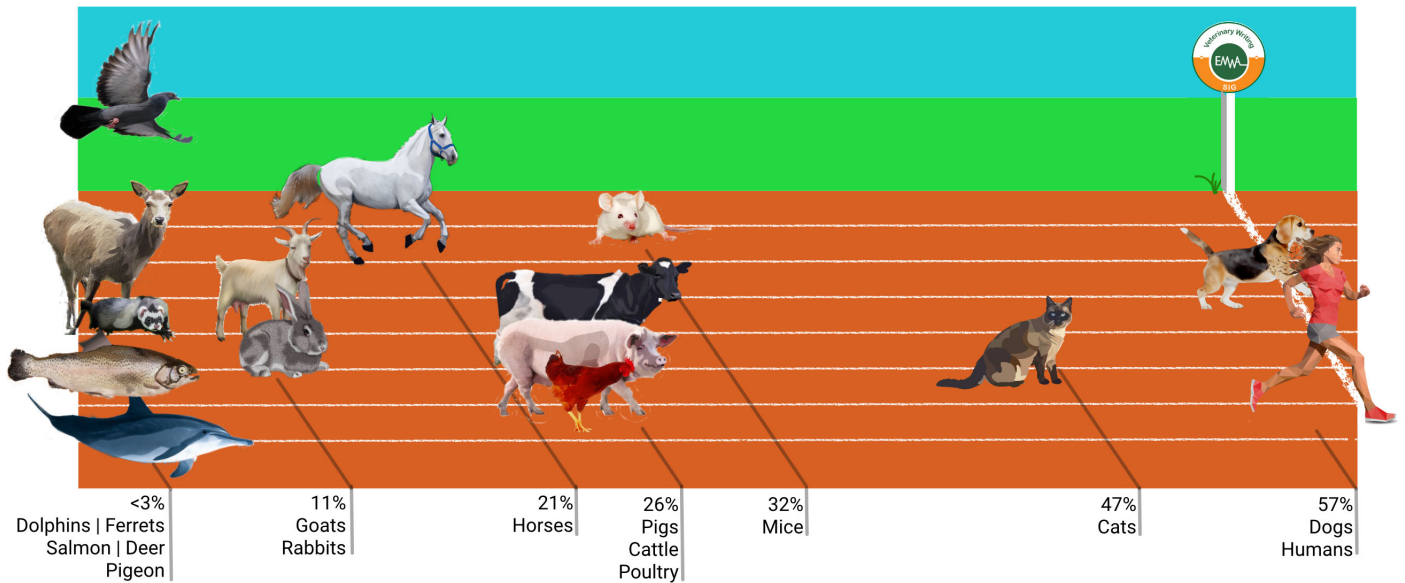


Figure 1. Which species do veterinary medical writers write about? Species that feature in EMWA vetSIG members' writing, percentages are expressed as the percentage of respondents that report writing about a given species in their work.

Figure created by Louisa Marcombes

but a crucial question had been overlooked in the initial survey: which animals do veterinary medical writers write about? Actually, this simple question could open the door to answering many others. Are veterinary medical writers divided along “small animal” versus “large animal” lines, as clinical veterinarians can be? Do our writers have to contend with pets one day and lab rats the next? Just how exotic is the work of a veterinary medical writer? To find out, we launched a one-question follow-up survey targeted more narrowly at those already working in the field to elucidate their species-writing habits.

The question was “What species feature in your medical writing?” I imagined I might get some vaguely interesting breakdowns by category, but I was unprepared for the excitement of watching the answers come in. The range of animals mentioned was intriguing (dolphins, deer, salmon, and ferrets all made early appearances), but the true excitement came from watching a desperately close race unfold as various members of the Animal Kingdom vied for the title of most written-about species. It was apparent that cows, pigs, and horses were running well but remained just behind the leaders. Cats got off to a flying start, but then faded in the latter stages. On the last day, I was able to watch a photo finish courtesy of the survey software real-time results page. Dogs put on a late spurt to finish in a dead heat with ... *Homo sapiens*, who had been leading pretty much from the first day (Fig. 1).

When the vetSIG discussed the results, this

thrilling race between species was our most talked-about finding. The presence of humans in writing about animal medicine might initially seem like an unwelcome intrusion. However, we interpreted it as a refreshing sign of the One Health times: growing recognition of the links between human and animal (and environmental) health. The wide species range also illustrates some of the fascination of working in veterinary medical communication: no one will get bored writing about the same study population.

Final thoughts

As stated on our website (www.emwa.org/sigs/vet-sig/) the vetSIG aims to “present and illuminate the broad and diverse area of Veterinary Medical Writing” and “encourage veterinarians and others to get in touch”. The survey results suggest we are achieving these objectives, and have informed our planning for 2021 and 2022. Our survey was not perfect, and perhaps questions would have been better designed if I had set the objectives and considered the target audience more clearly from the start. Even so, I found this survey to be a fascinating exercise, and it has been invaluable for the growth of our SIG.

In conclusion, EMWA's vetSIG can now be regarded as a profiled community, thanks to our birthday questionnaire and the follow-up species poll. The results demonstrate that veterinary medical communication encompasses a truly diverse range, free of species boundaries. However, I believe these questionnaires represent

a mere curtain raiser to our SIG's future: we have plenty of activities – and plenty of birthdays – to come.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data availability statement

Follow the link to the July 30th Q3 meeting in the Quarterly Meetings section at <https://www.emwa.org/sigs/vet-sig/>

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I want to thank the many respondents, especially those who made extra comments, or even sent follow-up mails, because this helped us to get a far fuller picture than the rather crude categorisations in the original questions alone made possible.

Author information

Henry Smith teaches Medical English at Kagoshima University's vet school in Japan. He has worked as a translator and editor in the field of veterinary medical writing for a number of years, and before that for a pre-clinical contact research organisation (CRO).



From the horse's mouth

The quarterly pick of the news from the veterinary world

A motion for resolution regarding the designation of antimicrobials to be reserved for the treatment of certain infections in humans has been defeated by a large majority in a plenary vote at the European Parliament, the *Federation of Veterinarians in Europe* reported on September 16, 2021 (<https://fve.org/fve-congratulates-the-european-parliament-for-taking-a-one-health-approach-and-voting-for-science-based-regulation-in-europe/>). The motion had sought to expand the criteria used for identifying antimicrobials reserved for humans (HRAM) through the presentation of a Delegated Act supplementing Regulation (EU) 2019/06. Critics of the motion feared that this would result in prohibiting antimicrobials that are crucial for the treatment of veterinary patients. An open letter was sent, coordinated by the European Platform for the Responsible Use of Medicine in Animals (EPRUMA), urging them to reject the motion. Heads of veterinary associations, deans of veterinary schools, and animal welfare organisations from all over Europe were counted amongst 9,000 signatories. The letter argued that the motion ignores currently accepted scientific evidence and that restricting access to antimicrobial treatment would pose an unacceptable threat to animal welfare.

Furthermore, the reduced spectrum of antimicrobials available for use in these species would favour the emergence of resistant microorganisms that could threaten human health. Finally, the motion goes against the One Health ethos, where healthcare for animals and the environment, as well as humans, is essential to protect the health of all. EPRUMA has hailed the result of the vote as demonstration that Members of the European Parliament “have understood the importance of animal health and its knock-on effects on public health, food safety, food security, and the environment.”

Researchers at the University of Guelph have found that veterinarians in the United States and Canada prescribed shorter antibiotic courses to treat dogs with urinary tract infections in 2018 than in 2016, it was reported in the September 19, 2021, edition of the *Humanimal Hub*. The study, by Weese et al. and recently published in the *Journal of Veterinary Internal Medicine* (doi: 10.1111/jvim.16246), reviewed the clinical records of 7387 dogs treated for urinary tract infection from 723 clinics in Canada and the US, the majority of which were first opinion clinics. The study directly compared the prescribing patterns of antimicrobials for urinary tract infections in dogs between 2016 and 2018, with reference to contemporary prescribing guidelines. The authors detected a significant difference ($P = .0002$) in the length of antibiotic treatment prescribed in 2016 (median = 14 days) and 2018 (median = 10 days) for treatment of sporadic bacterial cystitis. Furthermore, the authors found increased compliance with the recommended first-line treatment selection over the same period. The results show that awareness of antimicrobial stewardship is becoming more widespread, translating into a change in prescribing behaviour. However, the same study also showed an overall prevalence of 39% for using a “highest priority critically important” antibiotic as a first-line antibiotic treatment for canine urinary tract infection. This indicates a need to continue the work raising awareness of veterinarians in the responsible use of antimicrobials.

Vet Sustain, a not-for-profit social enterprise that aims to support the veterinary industry in adopting sustainable practice, and the veterinary pharmaceutical company Animalcare have announced a new partnership; it was reported at vetcommunity.com on August 25, 2021. In 2020, Animalcare was the first veterinary

pharmaceutical company in the UK to achieve carbon-neutral status. Vet Sustain was founded in 2019, providing support for individual veterinarians and organisations in improving their sustainable practice. The partnership has been forged with the collective goal of improving sustainability in the veterinary sector. A resource in high demand, as evidenced by a recent survey of British Veterinary Association members, found that 89% of respondents were motivated to play a more active role in the UK sustainability agenda.

In the previous issue of *From the horse's mouth*, we reported the unusually high incidence of feline pancytopenia cases presenting at veterinary clinics across the UK since the beginning of 2021. The cause was suspected to be exposure to mycotoxins, specifically T2 and HT2, which are hazardous to animal and human health. At the time, a possible link to a pet food production site in Lincolnshire, Fold Hill Foods, had led to a provisional safety recall of cat food lines manufactured at the site. Investigations that have since been undertaken by the Royal Veterinary College and the Food Standards Agency have found no link to the cat food manufactured by Fold Hill Foods, who are now working with local food safety authorities to restart production. Encouragingly, epidemiological data published on the RVC site (<https://www.rvc.ac.uk/news-and-events/rvc-news/feline-pancytopenia-update>) has shown weekly cases tailing off from a peak in mid-June, with the most recent update having been posted on September 13, 2021. Nevertheless, investigators continue to search for a dietary or possible non-food source of mycotoxins and updates are regularly posted on the site.