

Medical Journalism

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Medical journalist – a dream job?

My name is Erich Lederer. I am a medical journalist. Is it the kind of work I always wanted to do? No, definitely not. I actually never dreamt of juggling with words and sentences and in school I always had very mixed marks in German, my native language. But very early on I felt a strong interest in research and discoveries, and reporting on research in medicine is not too far off from that.

I have never regretted my decision about this career. I love to write about stuff which turns out to help people to recover from disease. People who just ten or twenty years ago would have been told that there is no hope for them. Equally, I like to address controversial questions like 'When does life end?' or 'Is disability of a foetus reason enough for an abortion?' As a freelancer, I most often choose the topics of my articles myself, but to be frank, there is a price to pay for that: my stories earn me just a fraction of my salary in my former life as a scientist, and even less than I would earn as a journalist employed by a publisher. There is no way to be in the lap of luxury with this job.

So how – and maybe even more interestingly – why did I become a medical journalist? Growing up in a very green suburb of Munich I always felt great interest in nature. For quite some time I hovered between forestry and biology as my future professional destinations. But when our biology teacher recommended a book to those of us interested in the nature of mankind, I decided on biology. The book was 'The Naked Ape' by zoologist and ethologist Desmond Morris. I studied at the University of Munich and obtained a Diploma in Biology. I had a keen interest in biochemistry and the subject of my thesis was bacterial metabolism. For my Ph.D. at the same university I turned to immunology, my favourite subject during my undergraduate studies.

It was never one of my aims, but retrospectively I feel lucky to have got the chance to spend a few years abroad. Working in one of the finest cancer research centres in Europe, what is now known as the Cancer Research UK London Research

Institute, I was fascinated by the molecular processes which turn a normal cell into an immortal one and about the ways to stop or at least to slow down the growth of tumour cells. At Karolinska Institutet in Stockholm this interest was strengthened by my close contact with famous scientists, including George and Eva Klein.

In the following years, I continued my scientific work as a *post doc* back in Munich, performing AIDS research and investigating the molecular mechanisms of inflammation. But the funding for each of the two *post doc* positions I held was limited to two years. The hospital where I worked rarely offered permanent positions to biologists and its regulations for scientific positions did not allow continuous employment based on temporary contracts. I therefore had to decide to go to another place to continue my academic career or to do something completely different. After some thought, I decided to leave my life as a scientist.

Over the years when I had talked to friends and relatives about my work, they had asked me to explain what I was doing exactly. They asked me questions such as 'Do you clone foetuses?' 'Do you have to kill animals?' 'Why do scientists have to kill animals?' and 'When will we be able to cure cancer?' I always felt the need to explain in lay terms what I was doing and why.

It was in London around 1990 when I first encountered a networked electronic information system for requesting literature and sending messages to other scientists: e-mail and the World Wide Web. Not having to go to the library and fill out a request form to order a paper copy of an article to receive it days later was a completely new experience for me. Due to my passion for explaining medical research to lay people and my ongoing enthusiasm for the Internet, I opted for a one-year training course to become an online journalist. I never thought that programming websites and cutting videos could interest me, but creating interesting stories with new technical means was another thing I found much fun in. At the end of the course, all participants had to spend three months doing practical work in an editorial office. I decided to work for Wort & Bild, the publisher of the magazine *Apotheken Umschau*, which is given

free to customers of pharmacies and has one of the highest circulations in Germany (around five million, twice a month). For those three months and also for the following two years, when I did a formal journalism traineeship, I was lucky to have one of the best German science journalists as my teacher: Günter Haaf.

While I was reasonably well equipped with technical skills I learned during the regular training course, Günter Haaf, one of the chief editors of *Wort & Bild*, taught me how to write for lay readers, how to explain what DNA means, and to use images to explain medical processes. After having spent two and a half years at the editorial office of *Wort & Bild*, he helped me to establish myself as a freelance medical journalist by commissioning a number of articles from me. It was very exciting to see my first text be published in *Financial Times Deutschland*, and soon afterwards another one in *ZEIT*. Now I am a regular writer for DocCheck, a Cologne-based agency with a regular online newsletter for physicians, which is also read by many others with links to medicine.

Freelancing can be a hard business but at the same time very fulfilling. In my first years working for DocCheck I mainly wrote about new results from research being translated to the clinic. Now, more and more often I love to discuss controversial subjects. But writing for an online news service provider, you have to learn to deal with the reactions of readers. Quite often there are strong influence groups, such as those who favour traditional medicine and supporters of alternative treatments. So the feedback on your article may not always reflect the labour you put into research and writing, but rather whether your arguments favour one or other side. DocCheck introduced a five-star grading scale some years ago. For me it has become a source of self-confidence as most readers seem to like the way I report medical information.

Not having studied medicine, as a journalist I have learned a lot about diseases and therapies, patients and doctors. I now feel much more confident in distinguishing bad studies from good ones, as well as explaining difficult issues so that non-experts understand them too. Still it is hard work for the money. What is more, many doctors do writing for free while on-call, undermining the fees

for the work of professional journalists, and some editors just use articles written by press officers of companies or associations, choosing cheap but not independent information. Luckily, many readers do appreciate the quality they get from genuinely independent journalists.

But such quality cannot be free. Every now and then some news agency or journal editor asks me to write a labour-intensive news story about certain diseases and treatment options for just a couple of Euros. Obviously they would not address such offers to me if there was not a market for cheap medical information. But in my opinion, information about illness and the best ways to treat it should be a product of reading many original publications from scientists, talking with experts, and learning by visiting scientific meetings. It is like putting pieces of a jigsaw puzzle together. You have to evaluate whether the result is of sufficient quality that you can give it to a physician treating his or her patients. Or whether it will increase a patient's knowledge about medicine, about their disease. In the end, patients should not feel at the mercy of doctors; they should be able to talk to them on the same level. By providing patients with high-quality information, I hope I help them to take part in decisions regarding their treatment.

Medical journalist – is it a dream job? Yes and no. With experience as a reasonably well-paid scientist and a rather 'poor' journalist, I would recommend this profession only for those who have much more passion for reporting fascinating facts and developments than for expensive holidays and cars. Would I choose it again? I think my answer is a cautious 'yes'.

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Author information

Erich Lederer is a freelance medical journalist. He has a Diploma in Biology and a Ph.D. in Immunology. In 2005 he was selected to participate in an advanced training course in science journalism funded by the Bertelsmann Foundation. He regularly writes for DocCheck, a German information and service agency for healthcare professionals. He lives near Munich.