

# On the western edge of Europe – medical writing in Portugal

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## Abstract

Within Portugal, medical writing is a new and rare profession. We describe our personal career routes to medical writing and discuss the barriers and the emerging opportunities for medical writers in Portugal. The profession of medical writing is not widely known about within the research community or the medical profession, and is not recognised as a potential career. The lack of pharmaceutical companies in Portugal also hampers the development of medical writing. The rapid increase in scientific research within Portugal over the last 30 years, however, has resulted in a substantial pool of highly trained researchers, a potential source of medical writing recruits. This development of research has increased the pressure to publish, and practising physicians are subject to similar pressure. Such pressures are likely to lead to an increasing demand for medical writers in Portugal.

**Keywords:** Portugal, Medical writing, Career development, Opportunities

## Different paths to medical writing – two personal accounts

*Eva Leiria*

My career path differed from what might be expected for a medical writer. After finishing my degree in psychology and while still working on my masters in the same field, I started working part time at Keypoint, Lda (a national contract research organisation) with responsibility for collecting data for several epidemiological studies. When the company needed to train and hire more monitors, my collaboration evolved into a job as a Clinical Research Associate (monitoring clinical studies). Soon, my enthusiasm for writing and for developing scientific skills was clear and I was given the opportunity to improve them by collaborating in the development of several study documents. Thus, I

was introduced to a completely new career – medical writing – of which I had previously been completely unaware. Since then (2008), I have been working full time at Keypoint in the development of different kinds of study documents (e.g. study protocols, informed consents, clinical study reports, manuscripts, abstracts) as a medical writer. In my continuous efforts to learn and grow in this field, and recognising the paucity of training for medical writing in Portugal, I found EMWA and began my EMWA Professional Development Programme (EPDP), thus acquiring a Foundation certificate.

*Marta Abrantes*

I started my career with a degree in pharmaceutical sciences. However, soon after becoming a licensed pharmacist I became interested in pursuing a research career in chemistry. After completing a PhD and post-doctoral studies, I took up a post as a research associate in the area of chemistry in a university and found myself spending most of my working time preparing (with much enthusiasm), in English, original manuscripts, reviews, and grant proposals for my research work.

Additionally, I have also started to prepare, in Portuguese, documents for science education and dissemination for the general public and funding benefactors. While looking for writing resources I became familiar with the concept of medical writing and started to consider it as a potential career path. EMWA and its conferences seemed the right place to begin. I started the EPDP, which has given me the opportunity to access high-quality training in medical writing, specifically in areas in which I had no background or no formal background (e.g. I have been proofreading papers for a while but had never been formally trained to do so). The fact that I will be awarded a certificate at the end of the programme was a decisive factor in my choice of EMWA as a training organisation. I believe that the EMWA certificate will enhance my curriculum vitae and improve

my future employment opportunities. EPDP training has already improved my skills as a scientific writer. It was also through EMWA that I made contact with my Portuguese colleague Eva. EMWA conferences are a great place to network even for new members.

### Medical writing in Portugal: barriers, opportunities, and needs

#### *Lack of awareness of the medical writing profession*

Despite the major developments in the field of research and development in Portugal, research careers remain largely within the universities and funded by the state. In this scenario, scientific and medical publications and other documents are usually developed by the researchers themselves. Most of these researchers are not aware of the existence of scientific or medical writers who can help them to write research documents. In addition, there is an enormous gap in Portugal in training in the medical writing field. Only a few college degrees include references to or training in medical writing in their curricula. Thus, students in scientific areas are not usually conscious, unless they are very proactive, that medical writing is a possible career for them. It is usually only after a period working in the field and/or by being involved in research and development that they discover this possibility. Even then they have to be very lucky or very proactive to begin a career as a medical writer and to get adequate training. Additionally, although training courses in medical writing outside university exist, they are still scarce.

#### *Lack of Portuguese or Portugal-based pharmaceutical companies*

One of the most important difficulties for potential medical writers in Portugal is related to the lack of Portuguese or Portugal-based pharmaceutical companies. Internationally, the pharmaceutical companies generate the majority of medical writing work. In Portugal, however, this work is usually confined to the writing of manuscripts, abstracts, and posters, since regulatory documents are generally developed by the central offices of international pharmaceutical companies. Usually, when part of an international clinical study is conducted in Portugal, all the documentation has already been produced abroad and the role of the Portuguese medical writer is to translate and adapt the documentation to comply with Portuguese law and requirements.

#### *Highly trained researchers available*

In the last 30 years Portugal has undergone a revolution in the field of research and development. The number of researchers has increased exponentially

from 0.9 (per 1000 of total employed) in 1982 to 8.3 (per 1000 of total employed) in 2010,<sup>1</sup> bringing Portugal in line with EU levels (number of researchers in EU27 = 6.5 per 1000 of total employed).<sup>2</sup> The number of publications from Portuguese institutions in international peer-reviewed journals has consequently risen from 3.9 to 121.3 publications per 100 000 inhabitants annually.<sup>3</sup> The contribution of health and medical sciences to the overall number of publications decreased slightly from 1982 to 2010 (31.3% and 26.6%, respectively) but still represents one quarter of all the publications of Portuguese institutions.<sup>4</sup> About half of the publications produced by Portuguese institutions (in all areas of knowledge) are written in collaboration with international partners, indicating the extent of international collaboration in scientific research. Publications reveal collaborations mainly with the following partner countries (in order of importance): Spain, the USA, the UK, France, Germany, Italy, Brazil, and the Netherlands.<sup>5</sup> In Portugal the distribution of researchers in activity sectors is not typical when compared with the rest of the EU27 (Figure 1).<sup>6</sup> Almost two-thirds of researchers (62.8%) work in higher education institutions and only 22.6% in private companies. It seems likely, however, that this distribution will change in future years. With limited recruiting by state stakeholders, highly trained researchers, especially those with international experience, are likely to be of interest to international companies as potential recruits.

#### *Growing market for medical writers*

While, in Portugal, the role of the scientific and medical writer often remains unknown, the development of the Portuguese scientific system has increased the pressure to publish in all scientific areas. The motto 'publish or perish' and its consequence for careers has motivated many

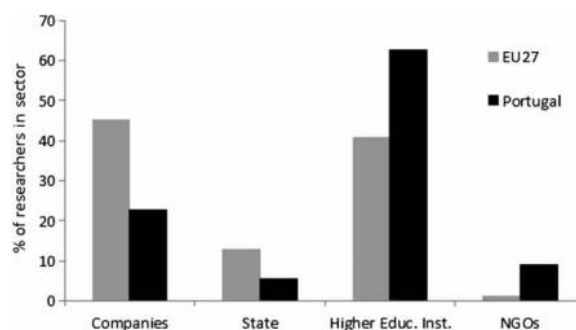


Figure 1: Distribution of researchers in different activity sectors (or types of organisations) in Portugal compared with the whole of the European Union (EU27). Types of sectors or organisations: companies, state, higher education institutions (higher educ. inst.) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

professionals (including medical doctors) to dedicate themselves more to research and to getting it published. Thus, we believe that Portugal is likely to see an increase in the market for the medical writing profession in the near future.

At the time of writing, we understand that there are currently only two EMWA members based in Portugal. Used to being a minority in many international associations and institutions because of our relatively small population (inhabitants of Portugal represented 2.1% of the total EU27 population in 2010)<sup>7</sup> this small number came as no surprise. A search in the professional network, *LinkedIn*, reveals a dozen or so people claiming to be medical writers in Portugal.<sup>8</sup> However, we understand that these numbers must underestimate the number of people working in the field. It is, however, our conviction that within Portugal more professionals do medical writing but do not label themselves as such. Identifying the other people based in Portugal who act as medical writers is an important first step towards national networking, education, and promotion of this professional activity in Portugal.

## Conclusion

We come from very different professional backgrounds and discovered medical writing in the course of our careers, through a combination of our interest in science and writing, luck, and proactivity in seeking out career development and growth. At present, few Portuguese students and researchers are aware of medical writing or have the opportunity to start a medical writing career as we have done. Nevertheless, we believe things are changing. With the help of EMWA, the two of us found each other, and we hope to spread the word about medical writing in Portugal and to help others to find their paths into this exciting career.

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## Author information

**Eva Leiria** started her research career as a Clinical Research Associate at a Portuguese CRO. She developed her scientific skills and began to work as a medical writer by supporting the development of protocols, informed consents, and other study documents. She was subsequently trained in scientific study design and publications.

## Disclaimer

The opinions expressed by the authors are theirs alone, and do not necessarily represent official opinions of their employers.

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