

Profile

SECTION EDITOR



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An interview with Chris Winchester

Chief Executive Officer of HealthScience communications consultancy
Oxford PharmaGenesis and a leading member of Open Pharma

Put on your hiking boots and take a ramble through the bucolic countryside of Oxfordshire. As you roam amongst the winding tributaries of the Thames, meandering between verdant rolling hills and quaint village pubs, you may come across Tubney Warren Barn. At first glance, it looks just like any other farm building, standing serenely amidst the chatter of birdsong and the nearby sounds of a village cricket match. However, beneath its rustic exterior, the building is a hive of activity. This is the office where Oxford PharmaGenesis was born, and from which it has gone on to become one of the largest independent players in its field, with over 200 employees in seven offices around the world. We've come here to meet the company's CEO, a man who is also one of the driving forces behind Open Pharma, Chris Winchester.

MEW: Hi Chris, thanks for agreeing to talk to us. First, tell us a bit about Oxford PharmaGenesis – how did the company start out, how did you get involved, and how did you come to be based in a barn?

(CW): Oxford PharmaGenesis was founded in 1998 by Dr Graham Shelton who, after lecturing in Zoology at Oxford, moved into publishing and communications. With his new company, he set out to create an environment in which talented people could deliver excellent quality to clients they liked. Our premises have always been an important part of that environment, and we were lucky enough that Graham found and renovated an eighteenth-century listed barn in a lovely location just outside Oxford. I joined the company 15 years ago, by which time that barn was home to 14 of us, and we have now expanded into two more buildings on the same site, as well as premises in central Oxford, London, Cardiff, Basel, and Philadelphia, with a new office opening in Melbourne, Australia. We recently marked



**Chris
Winchester**

our 20th anniversary at St Catherine's College, Oxford, at which we celebrated our independence under the rallying cry "our future, our values".

MEW: Congratulations and happy birthday! What would you say are the key factors in

remaining successful – and independent – for such a long period of time?

(CW): Our independence is central to our success, as it allows us to take a long view, prioritising our values of high-quality delivery and client service coupled with a commitment to social responsibility. These enable us to build

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lasting relationships with clients, colleagues, patients, and experts in their field. We pride ourselves on having a highly engaged workforce, with 86% of employees saying that we are a great place to work, and an employee turnover of below 10%. In 2012, a group of employees worked with Graham to secure the independence of the company through a management buy-out, and Graham remains our Chairman to this day. The fact that all our shareholders are actively engaged in our business enables us to deliver our strategy of staying close to our clients and supporting them as they move into exciting new areas.

MEW: Tell us a bit about your personal story: What drove you to work in this field, and what would you say are the main changes that have happened in our industry during this time?

(CW): I was attracted to biochemistry because of a curiosity about how organisms work in health and disease. However, my practical partners and supervisors can attest that, despite my best

efforts, I was not a natural in the lab. My doctoral supervisor said that he thought I could write, so when I hung up my lab coat I looked for jobs in science communication. After a brief stint as a management consultant, I got stuck into medical communications and haven't looked back. What really appeals is being able to use my scientific training to make a difference to patients' lives.

The biggest change I have seen in my 17 years in the industry is the recognition of publications as a discipline with its own specialist skills. Since 2001, we have seen the launch of Good Publication Practice (GPP) guidelines, the first position statements on the role of the professional medical writer, publication departments set up and moved into medical affairs, and the birth of the International Society for Medical Publication Professionals (ISMPP), which I currently chair. Professional organisations such as EMWA, AMWA and ISMPP play an important role in sharing best practice in our industry, and I was delighted to be invited by EMWA to co-lead the development of the first global

standard for professional medical writers, the AMWA–EMWA–ISMPP Joint Position Statement, which was launched last year.¹

MEW: The theme of this issue is "Public Disclosure". Why do you think this is important, and what impact do you think that timely public disclosure of clinical research could have on public health?

(CW): Our clients in the research-based pharmaceutical industry work incredibly hard to generate evidence characterising the safety and effectiveness of their medicines. The end users of evidence generated by the pharmaceutical industry need to be confident that they have all the information they need to make informed decisions. Only with complete disclosure will doctors, patients, payers, and others have the confidence to use new medicines to improve human health.

MEW: You're one of the driving forces behind Open Pharma. Tell us a bit about what this project is, and how it started.

(CW): Open Pharma was sparked by a discussion with a client one evening after the launch of the GPP3 guidelines. We went from discussing the flaws in the current model for publishing industry-funded biomedical research to wondering what we could do about it. After talking to a wide range of other stakeholders, we realised that there was broad recognition of the need for change, but that the pharmaceutical industry was largely left out of discussions about potential solutions.

We have brought together a group of forward-thinking pharmaceutical companies, publishers, patients, academics, regulators, editors, non-pharmaceutical funders, and societies to understand the role that the pharmaceutical industry could play in improving the publication of biomedical research. In particular, we have been excited to learn about specific initiatives in other sectors that may be applicable to our industry, including mandatory open-access policies, author identifiers such as ORCID, and preprints.

MEW: How do you think the pharmaceutical industry compares with academia in terms of publishing the results of its research?

(CW): Industry critics may be surprised to learn that the pharmaceutical industry is actually better at disclosing the results of clinical trials than most other groups, including academic, governmental, and charitable research funders. Research we conducted with fellow EMWA member Slavka Baronikova and colleagues showed that nearly



Tubney Warren Barn, Oxfordshire, England

three quarters of industry-sponsored trials are disclosed, compared with less than half of non-industry trials.² Disclosure of trials supporting FDA- and EMA-approved drugs is even better: typically 100%. And consequently, pharmaceutical companies perform well in the recently launched Food and Drug Administration Amendments Act (FDAAA) TrialsTracker from Ben Goldacre and the Oxford Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine, which measures compliance with the American FDAAA legislation.³

MEW: Why do you think this is?

(CW): Industry is used to working in a highly regulated environment, and meets its legal and ethical commitments by deploying appropriate internal and external resources, including professional medical writers and project managers in communications companies such as our own. Following in the footsteps of EMWA member Adam Jacobs, we at Oxford Pharma-Genesis have undertaken collaborative research demonstrating how we help the authors of industry-funded research to publish in an ethical, accurate, and timely manner.⁴⁻⁷

MEW: What message would you give to our readers, many of whom are dealing with the issue of publishing clinical data on a day-to-day basis? How can we have an impact?

(CW): Keep at it! We are likely to see big changes in the publishing of research from the pharmaceutical industry, which have the potential to strip away non-value-added activities involved in submission, resubmission, and author disclosures. What will be left is the core of high-quality, evidence-based communication. We can feel genuinely proud of the value we add to evidence-based medicine, and we must not be shy of sharing our own evidence of benefit with the people we work with every day. Just as

importantly, why not consider conducting your own research into the value of professional medical writing support? There is no better way to face the future than by being able to demonstrate that we do an outstanding job.

MEW: A lot of our readers are new to the field of medical communications. Based on what you've learned in your time, what advice would you give to someone starting out in the industry today?

(CW): Our industry crosses many disciplines, and is demanding and rewarding in equal measure. Cold, hard data are central to what we do, but ultimately human relationships are key. Therefore, it is important to be as open and honest as possible, no matter how difficult things get, because by gaining a reputation for integrity, and by getting the detail right, you can build the enduring, trusting relationships that will take you places, both literally and metaphorically.

MEW: And finally, when you're not championing open science or managing a successful company, what do you get up to in your spare time?

(CW): I enjoy playing the double bass in my local orchestra, spending time with my family, and pottering in the garden.

MEW: And finally, some quick-fire questions:

Beach break or skiing holiday?

Skiing holiday

Brahms or Beatles?

Brahms

Getting around Oxford: cycling or punting?

Cycling

Classic novel or non-fiction?

Classic novel if time – otherwise non-fiction, preferably a good biography

Football or rugby? (or neither!)

Neither!

Pen and paper or word processor?

Pen and paper by choice, word processor by necessity

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