Special Section



Winners of the Geoff Hall Scholarship Essay Competition

The Geoff Hall Scholarships are given in honour of a former President of EMWA. Geoff was a very special person, an extremely valued member of EMWA, and a very good friend to many EMWA members. He firmly believed that the future of EMWA lies in our new and potential members, and so it's a very fitting legacy that we have the scholarship awards in his memory.

The scholarships are awarded annually on the basis of an essay competition, and the title of this year's essay was "Creative Medical Writing: An Oxymoron?". There were even more entries than last year, and it was not an easy task to choose just two winning entries. However, two were eventually chosen, and the very worthy winners were Marisa Granados and Amy Joughin Parr.

Marisa Granados' interest in science led her to obtain two degrees in biotechnology, researching the production of biopharmaceuticals and stem cell growth. Marisa completed her PhD in Regenerative Sciences at Hanover Medical School in 2016, working on the development of scaffolds

FOR CORRESPONDENCE



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for the replacement and repair of the mitral valve by using decellularised tissue. Following her PhD, she moved to Gdansk, Poland, with her husband. Although she found her research interesting, she realised that what she enjoyed most was communicating it. Thus, after years of doing bench work she decided to move away from the lab and pursue her love of writing. Marisa was drawn to medical writing because of its broad scope. She enjoys the challenge of transforming complex research findings into different types of publications. In her free time Marisa loves reading and writing fiction, spending time in nature, and scuba diving.

Amy Joughin Parr qualified as a dentist in 2004 and has worked in general practice ever since. She is interested in evidence-based

dentistry, and received a research fellowship from the National Institute of Health Research in 2008 that allowed her to undertake research into chronic facial pain at the University of Manchester whilst continuing to work in practice. Amy has a master's degree in public health, an undergraduate degree in psychology and philosophy, a postgraduate diploma in healthcare law and ethics, and postgraduate qualifications in endodontology and restorative dentistry. She loves to read and write and hopes to find a parttime medical writing internship in the near future.

Marisa's and Amy's winning essays are presented in this section, and we wish them the very best at the start of their very promising medical writing careers. For those of you inspired by their achievements, this year's essay title is "The medical writer: Partner or servant?" The submission deadline is September 30, 2018.

I hope to read your essays soon!

Bestest, Lisa

Creative medical writing: An oxymoron?

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, creativity is "the ability to create", and to create means "to make or bring into existence something new". 1 As it applies to writing, creativity is most often associated with imaginative, fictional accounts. Yet, creative nonfiction is a wellaccepted literary genre, suggesting that a text can be both factual and creative. In this essay, I contend not only that medical writing can be creative, but that it should be.

Medical writing is about clearly communicating medical information. The message needs to be clear, complete, factual, and accurate. However, effective communication entails more than simply gathering and relaying information. If the writer were to present only the dry results of scientific research, the text would quickly become tiresome. Instead, for communication to be successful, it must engage the reader's attention, and this requires creativity. In fact, studies show that communicating scientific findings using storytelling, rather than dry, numerical results, improves the readers' attention and makes the information easier to process and remember.² This is particularly important in the context of medical writing, where the messages being communicated can have an important effect on the health of people.

Engaging, and keeping, the attention of the reader means the writer has to simplify the information being communicated. Results from scientific and medical research are complex and are often difficult to understand for the nonspecialised reader. The medical writer not only needs to translate jargon, but also to explain the scientific findings in a way that conveys meaning to his particular audience. For example, numbers are an important component of medical research results, and yet studies show that many people lack the appropriate numeracy skills to understand and interpret these results.² Research in the area of health care has shown that patients are more likely to understand the information and make correct choices when it requires less effort on their part to understand it.3.4

Moreover, results from scientific research must often be considered in the context of other research findings or in light of what others have done. In her essay "What Medical Writing Means To Me," Elizabeth Wager wrote, "It is a fallacy to believe that science can be reported completely dispassionately and without some form of interpretation." 5 Readers can easily become lost

in the wealth of information resulting from medical research. It is the task of the writer to point the reader to the most relevant results and to show the significance of those findings. Simplifying and interpreting the data, and adjusting the message to a particular audience entails creativity.

Thus far, it seems that creativity is indispensable in the broad field of medical communications. However, even in regulatory writing, where the writer is more tightly constrained by the need to conform to strict guidelines, creativity is still essential. This is because medical writers working on regulatory documents need to read and analyse a range of reports and then condense and synthesise the information for the readers. It is not just about simplifying jargon and reducing the complexity inherent to scientific results, but about combining different sources and finding connections between ideas to create something

Like gymnasts performing on the balance beam, medical writers dance on the narrow boundary between scientific accuracy and expressiveness. The purpose of medical writing is, above all, to communicate, and effective communication requires creativity. The medical writer needs to craft a tailored message that is not only factual and accurate, but also accessible. Precision and simplification must be balanced to reach a level that is "just right", neither unnecessarily complicated nor vague. As the 20th century American jazz player and composer Charles Mingus said, "Making the simple complicated is commonplace; making the complicated simple, awesomely simple, that's creativity".6

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Creative medical writing: An oxymoron?

Is "creative medical writing" an oxymoron? I sincerely hope not! Indeed, if this is the case I will be sorely disappointed, as it is a career I wish to pursue precisely because it may allow me to exercise some creativity. I enjoyed both the arts and the sciences at school, and finding a career that involved both proved difficult. Indeed, teachers advised that I choose one or the other to avoid looking noncommittal in future university applications. I chose science, and I don't regret that. I then chose a job that would allow me to exercise some artistic flair, dentistry.

However, there is a limit to exactly how much creativity one can bring to the surgery as an "ivory carpenter". Whilst my patients are grateful to have their teeth carefully restored to their original appearance, they would not be pleased to leave my surgery with a rendering of the Mona Lisa carved into their incisor. Nor will my copious, painstakingly accurate notes be a likely contender for the Pulitzer Prize.

Whilst exploring career options within dentistry, I was lucky enough to win a fellowship to undertake research training and soon discovered that it wasn't the research I enjoyed so much as the writing. However, funding in dental research does require that you do some actual research to write about, so I returned to my surgery to mull over other possibilities.

After some Internet research I happened upon a job description I hadn't been aware of, for "medical writing". The more I read about it, the more excited I became. It seemed the perfect marriage of my love for science and writing, and I have been considering this career move ever since. Unfortunately, day to day life has a way of taking over, and I hesitated to take the first step. Since the birth of my son, however, I realised that if he was in my situation, I would encourage him to pursue a career that he would enjoy. So would I enjoy it? Is it a creative occupation? Which brings us neatly to the question, "Is creative medical writing an oxymoron?"

In order to decide, it would be helpful to look at the meaning of an oxymoron. "Oxy" comes from the Greek word oxus, meaning "sharp". The meaning of "moron" may be more easily deduced, sharing its etymological origins with antiquated psychological terminology. "Moron" is also from Greek, moros, meaning stupid. An oxymoron is essentially where contradictory terms are used in conjunction as a rhetorical device. The word oxymoron is autological; the word oxymoron is



itself an oxymoron.

So are "creative" and "medical writing" contradictory terms? Let us define the terms first. Medical writing has been described as "writing scientific documents of different types, which regulatory and research-related documents, disease or drug-related educational and promotional literature, publication articles like journal manuscripts and abstracts, content for healthcare websites, health-related magazines or news articles". 1 Broadly speaking these documents fall into one of two categories: regulatory writing, and medical communications, often abbreviated as MedComms.

With regard to the definition of "creative", the Oxford English Dictionary defines it as "adj. 1. inventive, imaginative. 2 able to create". The Collins English Dictionary defines "creative writing" as "writing which is imaginative and inspiring, esp fiction".

Medical regulatory documents follow a structured format with specific requirements, often involving the synthesis of large amounts of data restructured in a clear and concise manner. It seems unlikely that such work would provide much scope for "writing which is imaginative and inspiring". Furthermore, in the world of accounting, being "creative with the figures" is often used as a euphemism for presenting data in a misleading manner. If the same "creativity" were applied to regulatory writing, those providing the original data would likely not be appreciative. Such an approach is unethical and could lead to serious consequences. Therefore with regard to medical regulatory writing it could be argued that "creative medical writing" is indeed an oxymoron.

On the other hand, one could contend that you are being creative in regulatory writing in that you are creating something new. Certainly it would be considered plagiarism to simply copy and paste sections of text and data. However, such an argument does seem to be pushing the definition of creativity to its limits. A stronger case for creativity in medical writing could be made for medical communications.

As described previously, medical communications involves a wide range of writing, and the potential audience and purpose for such writing is equally wide. Unlike regulatory writing where the target audience is obliged to read the documents, with medical communications one may need to entice and persuade the reader. Here creativity in terms of "writing which is imaginative and inspiring" may well be a useful asset. Arguably some work, such as writing research articles, has less scope for creativity than others, but even here one needs to hold the attention of the reader and ensure the experiment, data, and conclusions are presented in a clear and compelling manner.

In conclusion, is "creative medical writing" an oxymoron? I would argue that although medical writers cannot be creative with the facts and data that form the basis of their communications, in areas such as medical marketing, education, and journalism they have a wide scope to be creative in order to get their messages across to their intended audience. So no, thankfully for my future career aspirations, creative medical writing is not an oxymoron!

References

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