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Out on Our Own

Editorial

Welcome readers,

I've lost count how many times people ask me, what is a medical writer? And it isn't just my mum and aunt who ask me such a question; medical doctors, PhD students, and academic professors are often surprised that medical writers exist and do what we do. In the current times, medical writers are needed now more than ever to help disseminate accurately and concisely, especially in layperson terms, what is happening in the scientific world. Sara Ferrão, this issue's author on that topic, tells

us how she discovered the profession and gives a useful summary of the pros and cons of being a freelance medical writer, and the difficulties faced during the pandemic. As she states, perhaps for most freelancers our working environment and situation hasn't been dramatically affected by the pandemic; we're used to working from home, dealing with clients remotely, juggling schedules. But it's not all plain sailing. As a freelancer, there are many challenges one must face, as well. We usually discuss these types of dilemmas in our Freelance Business Forum at the EMWA Congress; in fact, Sara was the discussion

moderator for this topic at the virtual congress in November. If you're reading this tossing with the idea of being a freelancer, then check out her pros and cons list and head to the freelancer resource page for more tips.

We've entered 2021 and we're all praying for a better year than the previous one. I hope this issue reaches you well and soon we'll be chatting together at an EMWA Congress; fingers crossed for Cascais.

Until then, stay safe.

Laura A. Kehoe

Medical writing as a career

The beginning of my journey as a medical writer started a while back, on LinkedIn. I saw a post of an opening role for a medical writer, which caught my attention. It was from a former teacher of mine, and now scientific director of an agency in the UK, so I decided to reach out and ask about what exactly was a medical writer. Talking to her and discovering that I could make a living from writing and editing, something that I had been doing mostly as a hobby, was a revelation. Back then, I was working at a pharmacy, but I was also involved in small writing projects that started when I was on my first maternity leave. Of course, I didn't apply for the role, but I started researching about this exciting profession which, naturally, led me to EMWA.

The resources available on EMWA's website were extensive and useful, and I quickly became a member. It was definitely the first step into the beginning of my business; only I didn't know that then. The second one was attending my first



conference in Vienna, in which I was pleasantly surprised. I instantly connected with so many talented professionals and had a chance to learn and update knowledge from experienced medical writers. Looking back to those days, I would have never guessed that by now I'd be a full-time freelance medical writer and loving it!

experience. A medical writer's freelancing life can get isolating, and it comes with a certain amount of pressure, as it is a small business that requires an investment of time and money to succeed.

Being an introvert, I enjoy spending hours working in solitude, but I do sometimes miss talking to colleagues, exchanging thoughts and

Freelancing as a medical writer

Life as a freelancer has numerous perks, and it can be gratifying. It allows flexible hours, which gives me the freedom to be in charge of my schedule. It also allows me to work on multiple projects, learn about different topics, and gain experience in different kinds of materials. So, for me, it never gets boring.

Nevertheless, it also has downsides. Before I leapt into being a full-time freelancer, I obviously researched about this particular working style, and I soon realised that some freelance dilemmas are, in fact, common to all freelancers, regardless of their amount of

ideas. And so, lately, I find myself willing to invest more time building working relationships and networking. I learnt that this is not only a great way to develop professional contacts, but also a way to interact socially with other like-minded professionals and that it often gives rise to new friendships.

In my experience, LinkedIn is a great way to make contact with other professionals and to keep updated in our field. EMWA has also been an excellent means of networking and, as I mentioned earlier, it provides excellent resources to medical writers, including freelancers. It was through EMWA that I met my fellow Portuguese medical writers. With these pandemic times, the plan to create a wider local medical writers' group has been postponed, but hopefully, this is a project for the future.

Freelancing and COVID-19

Currently, in these pandemic times, networking can happen through a variety of different ways, like being part of social media groups or participating in online meetings and social events (see my article in the December 2020 issue of *Medical Writing: Social media: a tool that can benefit public health?*). While it is a different challenge that we all are getting used to, it can bring some advantages, especially to those too occupied and with little time to socialise outside the "office".

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on every freelancer medical writer's business. While some saw their projects dropped, others were overwhelmed by new assignments. Due to the nature of this pandemic, it not only brought us new project opportunities but also the need to adjust to new issues related to health and medical communications. Alternatively, the growing need to fight health illiteracy has indeed been exposed

Pros and cons of being a freelancer

Pros:

- Flexible hours (child-friendly schedule)
- Flexible work location
- Working environment is adjusted to you and your needs
- Select the projects and clients that are exciting to you
- Unlimited earning potential
- Running every business aspect (sales and marketing, invoicing, signing contracts, troubleshooting technology, keeping track of tax-deductible business expenses, making estimated tax payments, etc.)
- Ownership: you call the shots

Cons:

- It can be difficult to find clients
- Adjusting to solitude
- Lack of interaction with colleagues about daily work-related issues
- No paid time off, maternity/paternity leave or company-sponsored health benefits
- Adjusting to feast and famine periods – inconsistent work and cash flow
- No one to back you up if you become sick or injured
- Overworking – learn to switch off
- Running every business aspect (see above!)



during these times, and misinformation is as dangerous as the disease itself.

One of our many abilities as medical writers is that we are used to interpreting and making medical information understandable; therefore, we are more than qualified to help in the process of fighting misinformation and improving health literacy. This action is useful to mitigate negative effects on COVID-19 management and can also bring broader benefits, especially concerning the growing focus towards lay audiences' involvement in healthcare decisions.

Working as a freelance medical writer is a

challenge during a pandemic. But, as freelancers, we are used to adjusting our schedule and mindset to a variety of projects simultaneously and, in most cases, working remotely is not an issue. So, undoubtedly, these are characteristics that will help us to quickly adapt to the changes that are happening worldwide and allow our business environment to thrive.

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