

Getting Your Foot in the Door

Editorial

Bringing you some  in the time of corona.

Now, more than ever, do we need online resources for training, re-training, and cross-training. Thanks to Diana Ribeiro for sharing the information below to grow our GYFD online resources:

- **Writing in the Sciences from Coursera** is free without the certificate and touches on several basics.
- **The Health Writer Hub website** (healthwriterhub.com) run by Michelle

Guillemard, is aimed at health writers but it has a lot of useful information for medical writers, too. The blog is free, and there is also a free email course if you subscribe to her newsletter. Michelle also offers courses for a fee, such as “Introduction to Health Writing” and “How to Become a Freelance Health Writer”.

- **Stgilemedical** (<https://www.stgimed.com/events>) offers several e-learning modules on medical communications for a fee.

SECTION EDITOR



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Lots of thanks also go to Namrata and Gauri for sharing their stories of resilience and determination below. Just what we need, especially when job hunting in times of crisis.

To the medical writing community, stay strong, safe, and healthy.

Raquel Billiones

Big feet make for a great door stopper

Getting Your Foot in the Door – this title transports me back to a moment when I was a little girl trying on new shoes and being told, for the hundredth time, what big feet I have – pun intended.

Let me start this article by stating, upfront, my mantra for getting one’s foot in the door: **Be a stubborn optimist.**

My professional background is in dental medicine. I studied and practised dental surgery in India and eventually settled in Switzerland post marriage. The questions I had initially were straightforward and simple – first, what is fondue and how do I eat it? Second, is a crab-like, sideways walk spanning 2 hours normal for my first ski lesson? Third, and most importantly, how do I practice dentistry again? Unfortunately, the

only success story I have here is figuring out how fondue consumption works.

I found myself, after much struggle, at the brink of an inevitable career change. As I contemplated the options that best suited me, I started writing two blogs, one about my experiences as an ex-pat and the other dedicated to dentistry. I realised that writing has been an old companion, and in today’s day and age, something where I could find good value. It was sometime in 2017 when I googled the words “medical writing” for the first time. That year, I was introduced to two new bodies – my precious son and EMWA.

EMWA’s free online resources for new medical writers introduced me to the different types of medical writing. When confronted with a choice between medical communications and regulatory writing, a quick job search led me to quantify the latter as being more in demand.

However, the job description of a regulatory writer was akin to High Valyrian,¹ which brought me back to medical communication.

I got busy building my new skillset. Editing, proofreading, understanding the scientific methodology and what makes a good research paper. The thought process behind a research article as an author was new to me as I wasn’t trained in this skill as a medical doctor. I had referred to many research articles to guide my clinical

decisions but had never written a research paper or a thesis.

I did killer tooth extractions and root canal treatments but had never written a thesis before.

Pardon me, I retract my words – “killer” and “extractions” should never be mentioned in the same sentence.

Disclaimer: Any resulting nightmares of dental clinics are not the responsibility of the author.

I found myself having different transferrable skills than my competition who were (and still are) mostly PhD professionals. In fact, there was a good chance that my potential hiring manager would be a PhD graduate too. Consequently, I focused on the transferrable skills that PhDs



¹ The Valyrian languages are a fictional language family in the fantasy novels by George R. R. Martin and in their television adaptation *Game of Thrones*. High Valyrian is famously spoken by *Daenerys Targaryen*, *The First of her Name*, *Queen of the Unburnt*, *Khaleesi of the Great Grass Sea*, *Mother of Dragons*, *Protector of the Realm*, *Queen of...* (please read the novels for the rest of it).

bring, which led me to Cheeky Scientist. This proved quite useful as they prepare PhD professionals for entering the industry. I unashamedly declare that I was a silent weed to their entire business model. Thank you, *Cheeky Scientist*.

EMWA also introduced me to medical writing in the medical device industry. As comfortably as I had used medical devices as a clinician, I also had knowledge of drugs and their development. I found myself briefly studying both Pharma and MedTech industries to judge what suits me best. Quickly I realised that the High Valyrian only gets higher. The number of abbreviations used is mind-boggling. CSR, CER, ISO 10993, MDR, CSP, clinical trials in Pharma = clinical investigations in MedTech and so on. To end the confusion, I took to studying some more.

I did most online courses available on Coursera and Udemy (see references) to get accustomed to the new jargon. Additionally, I chose five varied job adverts as templates for my new self-made syllabus, deciphering the lingo and learning what I could to build my pitch. I started updating myself on current affairs in the medical device industry as this industry was more in tune with my professional skills. Learning about MDR helped me to foresee a great need for medical writers in the coming months. Armed with this new knowledge, I started applying for medical writing positions, confident that my new and refined CV should get me noticed.

I received a great number of rejection emails during that time. By mid-2019, the solution was clear – I must step out and be seen; otherwise, this Catch 22 situation will become a Catch 72² with wrinkles and a jarring pain in the hip if I don't do something about it. So I decided to attend my first EMWA conference in Vienna in May 2019.

**Rejection – the more you face it,
the more you train your mind to
not have an emotional response to
it every time it repeats.**

Armed with my fancy business cards, I made the conference my practice ground, polishing my newborn pitch and amending it as per to the person I spoke to. Each person I met was a mentor to me. Their smiles and openness validated my choice to attend it. I only managed

² Catch 72 (*noun*) – a dilemma or difficult circumstance from which there is no escape... for people in their 70s.

to enrol in one workshop but quickly discovered its advantages. I was absorbing every mistake I made during my conversations with subject matter experts and correcting it on the go. The EMWA conference in Vienna helped me rekindle something that had been lost – my self-confidence.

Be a stubborn optimist!

Being an optimist is crucial to a career change. The journey to attain this optimism is full of rejections, self-doubt, and monotony that eventually peaks and propels the person to undergo drastic changes to become an individual who deserves better. I found that shedding my title of Doctor and addressing head-on what I lack was mandatory. The stubbornness in this optimism is patiently self-constructed as a result of hard-hitting circumstances that everybody must face a few times during the course of a single lifetime. A resulting realisation that we are all temporary and sharing our time on this planet leads to an epiphany that there is no room for negativity or judgement as I might leave as quickly as I have arrived. If I must be stubborn, let it be for optimism.

Pessimism is a waste of time – literally.

As a result of all of these collective experiences, I managed to get my oddly sized feet through the door and landed my first job as a project associate in clinical affairs/regulatory affairs and quality assurance at a medical device consulting firm. Over the course of 6 months, I've written multiple clinical evaluation reports (CERs), attended internal and external audits and forged wonderful lasting relationships with my new colleagues. I'm now exposed to a new language style of corporate communication which is quite different from what I was accustomed to as a medical professional. I am under construction every single day, exhilarated by all the new knowledge and look forward to my next new challenge.

**Big feet may take longer to get
through the door, but they also
make for a great door stopper.**

After years of struggle, I can confidently say that I'm the doctor who can write CERs and more thanks to my new job experience and EMWA's support. I look forward to keeping the wheels turning, helping all those who currently find themselves at the brink of a career change

into medical writing.

I raise my glass to the stubborn optimists.

Resources:

1. Useful courses on Coursera:
 - Introduction to Systemic Review and Meta-Analysis – <https://www.coursera.org/learn/systematic-review>
 - Pharmaceutical and Medical Device Innovations – <https://www.coursera.org/learn/pharma-medical-device-innovations>,
 - Drug Development - <https://www.coursera.org/learn/drug-development>
 - Design and Interpretation of Clinical Trials - <https://www.coursera.org/learn/clinical-trials>
2. Useful courses on Udemy:
 - ISO13485:2016 – Design and Development of Medical Devices – <https://www.udemy.com/course/iso-134852016-design-and-development-of-medical-devices/>
 - Applied ISO14971 Medical Device Risk Management – <https://www.udemy.com/course/applied-iso-14971-medical-device-risk-management/>
3. Medical Device Made Easy podcast series by Monir El Azzouzi – <https://podcast.easymedicaldevice.com/>
4. British Standards Institution (BSI) white papers – <https://www.bsigroup.com/en-GB/medical-devices/resources/whitepapers/>
5. Greenlight Guru – <https://www.greenlight.guru/>
6. Author's websites – <http://dentalyoda.blog>, – <https://diaryofadiscoverer.wordpress.com>

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My journey into the industry

A few *Medical Writing* issues ago I wrote about how I started medical writing as a freelancer. After a freelance stint, predominantly in the in vitro diagnostics (IVD) industry, I decided to switch to an employed position. The question was how? In this article, I am sharing my journey into the pharmaceutical industry.

The most challenging part of being a freelancer is to gain/maintain customers while expanding your professional skills. Having decided to change my career trajectory, I found myself running around in a circle of regulatory writing for pharma or medical devices, medical communications, promotional writing! What should I focus on? The choices were endless. The more I delved into the realm of medical writing, the more I realised that I cannot possibly stretch myself in all directions. Therefore, I needed to streamline my efforts in finding a balance between focusing on topics along my freelance path (that could lead towards future customers) and following my interests.

Looking back, there were four important steps that connect my journey like a thread.

Belonging to a professional society

Professional societies provide insights into the requirements for each career. Fortunately, I was already a part of EMWA and cannot stress enough how invaluable EMWA is for my medical writing career. The workshops offered by EMWA's professional development programme were the perfect platform to implement my strategy. With every workshop I took, my perspective and interest changed. I found out what I do like and what I would rather let go of. Moreover, it was very encouraging to hear from Gillian Pritchard and Raquel Billiones that regulatory medical writers can switch between writing for the pharma and medical device industries once they know the basics. I no longer felt that my IVD background did not matter. On the contrary, it was an opportunity. For example, the use of companion diagnostics in personalised medicine would require co-development of the review and approval process and the new MDR and IVDR regulations would bring the two industries closer to the pharmaceutical regulatory pathway.

EMWA also provided me with an opportunity to network. This was the next essence that paved my journey.

“The small but powerful word ‘YET’ was enough for me to realise that I do possess the required transferable skills as a PhD. It was just a matter of time until I would get experience under the right circumstances.”

Networking

EMWA conferences are a great venue not only to learn new tools and tricks of the trade but also to interact with potential clients and other members that are active in the field. Networking and discussing your point of view not only lets you identify your qualifications but also makes you aware of the challenges that others are facing. Sometimes, the exchange of ideas leads to solutions, such as collaboration amongst freelance colleagues. At other times, it leads to unexpected and much-needed advice. Beatrix Doer's words at the Warsaw conference still ring in my ears. When I told her about the almost standard response of “you are not experienced” that I got during my job application process, she added a small three-letter word “YET” after the word “experience”. She was right and it changed my perspective completely! The small but powerful word was enough for me to realise that I do possess the required transferable skills as a PhD. It was just a matter of time until I would get experience under the right circumstances. So, I continued with my efforts of investing in myself.

Spruce up your CV

For a lot of people with an academic background, the question of “what do I put in my CV” is an uncomfortable issue. Suddenly, the imposter syndrome sets in and you freeze. This is bound to happen if you think that your entire future professional career depends on your CV. While it is true to some extent, I have learnt to look at the CV from a different perspective. I let the CV help me in truly understanding my qualifications. Only when you understand your qualifications can you articulate them in a way that would be attractive to a potential employer. In other words, you need to “market yourself”. There is a trove of CV tailoring websites/software out there that will give you a nice final document. However, it is the content and the way it is presented that matters. Unless you have thoroughly understood your qualifications, you will always have a hard

time convincing the potential employer. A good exercise that helped me was making an Infographic CV, which was introduced to me by EMWA colleague Carola Krause (who over time has also been a great source of advice) during a seminar. Essentially, an Infographic CV contains concise information in a graphic form, but with a bird's eye view. It was quite challenging to weed out the real information that I wanted to emphasise on and leave non-relevant experience out. After the bird's eye view of my CV, it was easier to tailor the content for job-specific requirements. Subsequently, I did create a standard CV, which was more detailed.

Contribute

It is quite important for medical writers to publish articles, not only to sharpen your writing skills but also to realise that your content has an essence that convinces the reader. The topics can range from more general ones, for example, your career path or more specific ones, for example, changes in the regulatory guidelines. EMWA's journal *Medical Writing* is an excellent platform to share your experiences and know-how. It was very satisfying to be able to give advice when people reached out to me after reading my story as a freelancer. Inspired by this experience, I volunteered to write this article. There are several other open-source platforms or blogs via which you can give back to the medical writing community.

At this stage in my career as a regulatory medical writer, I feel more confident in defining my professional identity. Moreover, I am excited to be part of an industry that strives to bring medical solutions to patients.

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