



Out on Our Own

Welcome readers,

As I write this editorial, the coronavirus pandemic is having profound effects around the globe. In a time of uncertainty, stress, and fear, I try to think of the positives. For me, one positive is that I'm a freelancer. I have not lost any clients, I can still work, I have my desk already set up at home, and I can work to a flexible schedule; wonderful as I now have two young children at home full time! We are all going through this pandemic together, but everyone's situation is different. Actually, positively thinking, freelancers could be at an advantage during this time. Many full-time workers, who usually work in the workplace, are

in unknown territory by setting up their offices at home. Perhaps this is easier if you don't have children that you need to homeschool, occupy, and comfort, but for people in this situation, juggling full-time work with children and a partner's full-time work is near impossible. Many companies will see a decline in work productivity, but that's where us freelancers can "fill in the gaps". We're already set up to do exactly what many companies are asking their employees to do. Stay open-minded, network virtually to adhere to the social distance rules, and who knows what work may come your way during this time!

Our author this issue, Archana Nagarajan only decided to become a freelancer a year ago, and by

the sounds of it, it was the best decision for her. She explains about her quick journey into becoming a freelance medical writer and the projects she's taking on during that time. Hungry to learn all fields of medical writing, she expanded her medical communications repertoire to include regulatory writing as well. As we've sadly missed the May congress, and thus the Freelance Business Forum, she remains passionate about sharing knowledge and does so by offering some essential tips for new freelancers starting out. Maybe she'll expand on these at the next EMWA!

Stay safe until then.

Laura A. Kehoe

Switching careers: My path to medical writing and freelancing

I get to share my journey into freelance medical writing at a time when the world has come to a standstill. We all are learning new ways of balancing our professional and personal lives.

It has been a year since I became a freelance medical writer and the journey, in some ways, reflects and resonates with so many of my fellow medical writers, but it is also my own unique, personal journey. I currently work in medical communications as well as regulatory writing: editing and writing journal articles for non-native speakers and also, writing regulatory documents for medical devices.

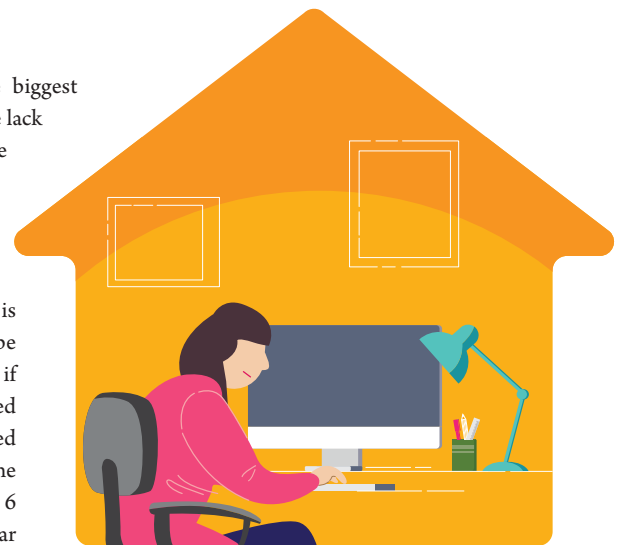
Medical writing as a career

I did my PhD in genetics from Bengaluru, India, and moved to Nice, France, for a post-doctoral stint in 2009. Ten years, four countries (France, England, Norway, and Germany), three post-doctoral positions in ageing biology and one child later, I am now settled in the Hanseatic city of Hamburg in Northern Germany.

After taking time off for a couple of years to raise my daughter and helping with family sickness, I wanted to get back to work. I absolutely love science and immensely enjoyed my career as a scientist. However, I had reached a point where doing more post-doctoral research

did not make sense. The biggest hurdle at this point was the lack of knowledge and guidance for an alternative career.

I spent a year in limbo unable to make up my mind on what to do. Germany is not an easy country to be employed in, especially if your degrees are not earned here or if you do not speak the language (I did spend 6 months during this 1 year upgrading my German language skills). I had always enjoyed the process of science communication and was looking at ways of leveraging that. Around this time, I shared my predicament with one of my close friends, and as it turned out, she was working as a medical writer in the USA! I think that life is full of such moments when a path becomes clearer at just the right time. She shared her journey into medical writing with two parental breaks to raise her kids. Following her suggestion, I joined EMWA in December 2018, and since then, there has been no looking back.



EMWA has plenty of resources online and also in the quarterly *Medical Writing* journal. I read through the articles available on various types of medical writing (the primer on *Introduction to Medical Writing* available on the website is pure abbreviated gold). I did not want to move out of Hamburg, where my family is settled, and where we have friends now. Hamburg does not have too many pharmaceutical firms and the medical writing jobs are limited. Freelancing, thus, seemed to be the logical way forward.

Medical communications: A logical extension from being a scientist

I started with writing and editing manuscripts for journals as this is a skill, we all learn as scientists. However, I quickly realised that writing for someone else was not the same! Most importantly, you are not intricately aware of the science behind every experiment. Second, journal selection, sticking to various guidelines (ICMJE, ISMPP, CONSORT, etc.) are some of the non-scientific work that also takes quite a bit of time. However, having a PhD does have its advantages. I have, over time, become adept in picking up new knowledge with ease, doing literature searches, extracting information from the thousands of scientific papers available online, and judging a paper for its merits and shortcomings. Over the last one year of freelancing, I have written and edited manuscripts in life sciences (both preclinical and clinical) and I should say that learning about new therapeutic areas has been very rewarding.

Medical communication was a natural choice as it was an extension of my knowledge as a scientist and involved dissemination of science to a varied audience. In the past year, I have also written quite a few articles and blogs for various online magazines and those have been extremely wonderful experiences (a few links are at the end of the article). I wrote for a Women in Science series on four Indian women scientists, which was a moment of pride for me to bring to the world the stories of these wonderful superwomen from my country.

EMWA conference and networking: A brilliant experience

I attended the EMWA spring conference in Vienna last year, which was an invaluable experience and also, it reaffirmed my belief in choosing medical writing as a career. I benefitted immensely from all the workshops that I attended, the seminar on medical writing as a career, the freelance business forum and most importantly, the network of medical writers that I could learn from. The biggest gain for me was to meet other medical writers who were starting out like me and taking those tentative steps towards a new career. It helped me get over my imposter syndrome. I eventually attended the Malmö conference in November 2019 as well and obtained the foundation certificate issued by EPDP.

Regulatory writing: A different world

Vienna is where I also networked with the owner and co-founder of the company that is currently one of my clients. I had mentioned (probably more than once!) to him that I really wanted to get into regulatory writing and thus, was looking for an opportunity. He reached out to me sometime in August to work as a consultant for FDA regulatory submissions for medical devices and combination products. I was really happy to join the team, and in the past 6–7 months, my learning curve has been on a steep upward trend – learning about various FDA regulatory requirements, writing QMS documents, interacting with clients, working remotely in a team (that are worldwide and in all the possible time zones!), learning the differences in FDA requirements and EU-MDR, project management – the list is endless. I have heard many times over that regulatory writing is dry. Till now, my experience has been the opposite. I find it challenging and interesting. Coming from a basic sciences background, I find regulatory writing fascinating. I'm learning about mechanisms that control the safety and efficacy of the product, how the life cycle of an entire drug or device is controlled while making sure that the latest research is translated into medical innovations that benefit the end users without too much of a delay, and how clinical trials are conducted.

I enjoy the flexibility that my freelancing offers, yet I do find that I need to be on my toes and be ready to adapt to client needs and also, keep updating my knowledge base. However, I have no complaints during these unprecedented times that we all find ourselves in. I already work from home, and focus-wise it is not much of a shift. I feel that I made the right decision to be my own boss.

A few of the articles that I wrote last year:

- <https://medium.com/sci-illustrate-stories/janaki-ammal-466b644a4369>
- <http://www.sciwri.club/archives/9162>
- <https://medium.com/sci-illustrate-stories/bibha-chowdhuri-c7c48792d2b1>
- <https://medium.com/sci-illustrate-stories/asima-chatterjee-1ca581dc542f>

Freelancing as a medical writer and consultant

I thought I would share some tips and advice for starting and sustaining as a freelance medical writer.

- **Network, network and network.** Many of us who come from a scientific background are

introverts and clearly feel like a fish out of water when it comes to networking. However, there is no other way to sustain your business than to keep networking (especially in the beginning). You have to put yourself out there!

- **Update your LinkedIn profile.** Don't have a generic one. Have one that stands out. List the services that you offer. Actively engage in the platform (network!).
- **Don't be overwhelmed.** We all were beginners once. Don't expect miracles from day one.
- **Update your knowledge constantly.** I have signed up for some newsletters that keep me posted about the happenings in the pharma world, medical devices, etc.
- **Join EMWA and their local city groups.** Yes, it is worth it! Feeds back to my point number one.
- **Take up a few courses.** Even if it means spending some money (if you can). It will be worth it in the end. I did some courses on scientific writing from Coursera, Edx, etc.
- **Set up a nice workspace.** Keep it organised and clutter-free.
- **Get to know the country-specific laws.** Learn about freelancing laws in the country you reside in. Always have your tax papers, invoices, etc., in order to avoid a last-minute scramble.
- **Remember you are in it for the long run.** Keep calm and enjoy writing! Enjoy the luxury of going out on a walk, able to do a workout, cook with the music on in between writing when you work from home!

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