



CAROLINA CONNECTIONS

Carolinas Chapter—American Medical Writers Association

March 2007

President's Message

By Tara Hun-Dorris

I've conducted an informal survey among the most recent AMWA Carolinas past presidents, and we all agree, the question we are most frequently asked is: *how do I break into medical writing?* It's the classic Catch-22: In most cases, to be hired as a medical writer you need experience, but how on earth do you get experience if no one will hire you?

If I had the answer to that question, I'd probably have a global medical writing recruiting empire and be zipping around in a Lexus rather than having a dimly lit, one-woman freelance shop with a tiny window in the family room over the garage and a Toyota Camry. I can only speak for myself, but I got my start in medical writing through a combination of (environmental) science and health-care writing experience, luck, willingness to take a low salary at a CRO (which was higher than the salary I was making as a communications director for an environmental nonprofit), and the ability to talk my way through a job interview.

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Freelancers Tell All

By Tracey Fine

Our annual freelance panel discussion was held Thursday, February 22, 2007 in Durham. This year's panel comprised an interesting mix of experience and freelance business structures. The freelancers shared their personal journeys into medical writing and editing and how they made the leap from in-house work to home-based businesses.

Terry Paul, PhD, principal of Paul Medical Writing, has been a full-time freelance medical writer since 2002. After many years of laboratory research in infectious diseases, Terry decided to make the switch from bench science to medical writing. In 1999, he joined the Medical Publications department at GlaxoWellcome, where he helped clinical research scientists write manuscripts on HIV. Later, Terry joined the clinical submissions department, where he wrote clinical study reports on a variety of topics. Following GlaxoWellcome's merger with SmithKline Beecham and the ensuing reorganization of GlaxoSmithKline, Terry decided to become a freelance writer. Five years later, Terry is enjoying the flexibility freelancing offers in terms of quantity and types of work. Most of all, Terry appreciates the opportunity to spend more time with his 3 small children.

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Annual Spring Conference Dates, Courses

By Pat French

The annual Spring Conference will be held on Friday, May 4, 2007, at the [Friday Center](#) in Chapel Hill, NC. We are excited to offer some classics this year in addition to a few new options. As in 2006, 4 courses will be offered:

- Writing the Final Report of a Clinical Trial (PH): Howard Smith, MA
- Statistics for Medical Writers and Editors (C): Bart Harvey, MD, MEd, PhD
- Understanding Sample Size and Study Power (ADV): Bart Harvey, MD, MEd, PhD
- Basics of Human Anatomy and Physiology (EW): Mary Ann Foote, PhD

And for the first time, we are also offering 2 open, noncredit sessions:

- Evidence-based Medicine: Howard Smith, MA
- Understanding Pharmacokinetics and Pharmacogenomics: Dana L. Randall, MS, PharmD, and Edward K. Lobenhofer, PhD

Also new this year, the chapter will have a “night on the town” in Chapel Hill. Locals will take the group down to Franklin Street and on a short tour of the UNC campus. The group will then go to dinner at a restaurant that has a lot of local flavor. The chapter will provide transportation to Franklin Street; however, attendees will be responsible for their own meals. If you would like to be included in this event, please e-mail Tara Hun-Dorris at tara@thdeditorial.com.

Please visit our [Website](#) to download the registration form and obtain additional information. Hope to see you there!

Upcoming Events

AMWA Carolinas has many important, informative, and fun events coming up soon. We hope to see you at one or more of these! Please see our [Website](#) for more details as more events are added.

March 22	OTC Reader's Group, Carolina Brewery, Chapel Hill, 6:30 pm (see page 4 for details)
April 5	Bimonthly networking dinner, NeoChina, Cary. 6:30 pm. <u>Theme</u> : Ethics of Authorship. Guest speaker: Cindy Hamilton , Pharm D, ELS.
May 3-4	AMWA Carolinas Annual Spring Conference, UNC Friday Center, Chapel Hill (see above for more info).
June 7	Bimonthly networking dinner, NeoChina, Cary. 6:30 pm.
July 5	Bimonthly networking lunch, Place: TBA. Noon.

Getting Started in Medical Writing: Experiences of AMWA Members

In this issue of *Carolina Connections*, we are debuting a section in which experienced medical writers share how they got started. Our first writer is Jennifer King, PhD, ELS, President of August Editorial, Inc.

What was your first medical writing job, and how did you get it?

I was hired as a writer for MicroMass Communications, Inc. I was actually an on-site contractor hired through a documentation services company called TPS. At MicroMass, I started by writing patient-targeted content for managing chronic conditions such as osteoporosis or high blood pressure. I later moved into more of an editorial role, in which I edited stories of other writers and helped develop content strategies for entire programs.

I found out about the job in the classified section of the *News and Observer*. At the time, I had just graduated with a PhD in cell biology. Toward the end of my graduate schooling, I took courses on writing and had published 2 of my student pieces. I think having even those few pieces helped me to be taken more seriously as a writer than I would have otherwise been.

What is your current position, and what skills are needed for it?

I currently have my own business, August Editorial, Inc. I spend most of my time writing and editing manuscripts for medical journals. I like writing about topics related to infectious diseases because the biology still fascinates me. I don't think you have to have a science background to do what I do, but I think you need to be curious about the science. Most people who have their own business spent 5 or so years in industry developing writing skills and learning about different types of projects. For running a business, you also need to have good administrative skills and at least a willingness to deal with sales and budgeting to ensure profitability.

If you were to hire someone without much experience, what would you look for?

I'd want someone who has a passion for writing and learning. As a former president of the Carolinas Chapter, I can't tell you how many people want to become a medical writer without having any actual interest in writing. How do you show an interest? By writing. Write for your church newsletter, the local paper, this newsletter, whatever. But write something. Have something to talk about and show a potential employer.

I also like people who ask questions other than, "Can you find me a job?" Ask about how other writers got their start, what kind of projects they work on, what the trends in the field are. It shows you are thinking beyond getting a paycheck.

If I think someone has a genuine interest in writing, I then want to know if she pays close attention to details. Will she remember my name and what we talked about? Can she speak in detail about her past work? I'm not talking about having a photographic memory; I'm talking about paying attention. Medical writers often work with doctors, and doctors generally don't have patience for people who seem vague or slow.

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Getting Started... *continued from page 3*

Any other advice for someone starting out?

Network as much as you can. Many writers are introverts and use the label as an excuse to avoid talking with other people. I myself am an über-introvert: when I was little, I wanted to be a hermit when I grew up. With a lot of practice, I am now fairly comfortable in networking. I no longer view networking as schmoozing or being fake—I view it as building relationships and exchanging information. I think if everyone viewed networking this way, we'd all have jobs, and there would be less need for columns like this!

Next OTC Readers Group: March 22

The next meeting of the OTC Readers will be held on March 22 at 6:30 pm at the [Carolina Brewery](#) (upstairs), 460 W. Franklin St., Chapel Hill, NC (942-1800). We will discuss the nonfiction book *Born on a Blue Day: Inside the Extraordinary Mind of an Autistic Savant* by Daniel Tammet. Note: This book is available only in hardcover (list price: \$24); however, reduced prices are available through [Amazon.com](#) (\$14.40 new; used copies are available for less) and [Barnes and Noble](#) (\$16.80, which is 30% off the cover price). For more information about OTC Readers, contact Jenny Walker (jenny.walker@duke.edu) or Tracey Fine (finemedpubs@earthlink.net).

Review of *Born on a Blue Day: Inside the Extraordinary Mind of an Autistic Savant*:

Although Tammet is only 27, his autobiography is as fascinating as Benjamin Franklin's and John Stuart Mill's, both of which are, like his, about the growth of a mind. Not that Tammet is a scientist-statesman or philosopher. He is an autistic savant who can perform hefty arithmetical calculations at lightning speed and acquire speaking competency in a previously unknown language in mere days (the latter capability he used to create the Web-based language-learning systems with which he supports himself). More socially competent and independent than the autistic savant famously played by Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man*, Tammet shares his peers' strong preferences for routine, peace and quiet, private space, and literalness, as well as aversion to chance occurrences, aural and informational noise, and figurative language (despite his arithmetical gift, he can't do algebra; he reads a lot but never fiction). He learned fellowship very gradually and says he couldn't really acknowledge his eight siblings until he grew up. He also writes some of the clearest prose this side of Hemingway; he tells his story with such concentration, precision, and simplicity that his familial poverty, schooling as a "mainstreamed" student, self-realization as gay, and embracing of Christianity prove as enthralling as they are, ultimately, normal.

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Freelancers Tell All, *cont'd. from page 1*

Terri O'Quin is the principal of Terri O'Quin Medical and Scientific Editorial Services. Terri came to medical editing with a Master's degree in English. She first dipped her toes into the waters of science editing when she was hired by a publisher to edit science textbooks. Charged with ensuring that college-level textbooks were understandable to nonscientists, Terri got a fast and thorough science education. She took her new skill set to S&R Communications Group, where she ascended to the position of Manager of Medical Editing. Terri quickly found that her managerial duties rarely allowed her time to do what she enjoys most: editing. Terri now enjoys the life of a full-time freelance editor. She does many different types of editing, but concentrates on fact-checking and speaker training slides.

Jennifer King came to medical writing with a PhD in cell biology (see [Getting Started](#), p. 3). During her graduate studies, Jennifer realized that writing about her research was what she enjoyed most. After graduation, she joined MicroMass Communications, where she learned how to write patient-oriented materials about chronic health conditions. She also received editorial training. Jennifer parlayed this experience into an author's editor position at the Duke Clinical Research Institute (DCRI). Eventually, Jennifer decided to start a family and wanted the freedom to work part-time and on her own terms. With a baby on the way, Jennifer left the certainty of a regular paycheck and started her business, August Editorial, Inc. Jennifer appreciates the autonomy that freelancing affords her. She works on interesting topics with clients she enjoys. However, she did learn that working at home with a newborn was a daunting challenge.

Susan Sisk, PhD, brought the perspective of a new freelancer to the panel discussion. She began her business, SFP Consulting, in early 2006. Like other panelists, Susan began her medical writing career after an unsatisfying career in bench science. Following medical writing stints at 2 contract research organizations, Susan joined Schwarz Biosciences, where she helped build their medical writing department. A lover of data, Susan focused on regulatory writing. Throughout her career, she honed her project management skills by assuming responsibility for large assignments, including New Drug Application submissions to the FDA. Like many successful people, Susan eventually found that her workload had become untenable. She wanted to spend more time with her family and decided that freelancing was the answer. She planned her exit from corporate life carefully by saving a year's worth of home-operating expenses before she left behind the security of her regular paycheck. She also started a database of the business contacts she had made over her career and began informing them of her new business venture. After 1 year, Susan reports that her business is thriving and she's spending more time with her family.

Overall, the panel agreed that freelancing not only was satisfying work but also had exceeded their expectations. While it is challenging to manage a business and produce all the deliverables, the panelists reported that the work was rewarding and that their family relationships had improved immeasurably.

President's Message, *cont'd from page 1*

Once in the job, I knew I really didn't have the experience required—heck, it took me 6 months to figure out what CRO stood for, and I was working for one! But I was proactive about the whole thing; I bugged the people around me to teach me and lobbied aggressively and successfully to be assigned to projects and to receive AMWA training. I also had a boss and coworkers who were willing to share their knowledge. That helped, especially sitting down and writing documents—baptism by fire, as they say.

Everyone has a different path to success—I was a journalism major and earned a master's in mass communications. Most medical writers seem to have backgrounds in bioscience and/or English/journalism, although there is probably an art history major and maybe a structural engineer out there somewhere who have transitioned into this career. You can read about AMWA members getting their start in this and upcoming issues of this newsletter (see the [“Getting Started”](#) story, page 3).

There are 3 traits I've identified in most successful medical writers I've gotten to know, regardless of where they choose to work or how they got their start. Let's call these “Tara's 3 T's of Medical Writing”: talent, tenacity, and training.

Talent. I hate to state the obvious, but a common attribute most successful medical writers share is the ability to write. Everyone is a frustrated novelist at some level, and writing just comes more easily to some. Writing skills may be almost instinctive or may be earned through many, many years of practice and careful crafting of the trade. I suspect it is usually a combination of both. And the level of talent can affect the ease of transition into this career. It's like my mom's old John McEnroe/Jimmy Connors tennis analogy. That John McEnroe, he could hit a tennis ball in his sleep. It seemed almost effortless when he was in his prime—you had the impression he could go out partying all night long, eat massive quantities of junk food, and get no sleep and still kick some major butt on the tennis court. Jimmy Connors was also very gifted, but he had to work a lot harder for it. While both men excelled at the sport, it seemed to come more naturally to McEnroe. Which brings us to....

Tenacity. Like Jimmy Connors, successful medical writers persist. They don't give up after 1 failed attempt to get a job or land that huge freelance contract. They say: *How can I improve myself? What can I do to become more marketable/desirable to employers?* They seek....

Training. There are so many opportunities to improve ourselves these days. We have the AMWA network and core curriculum program, which includes local opportunities I hope you will all take advantage of (our [Annual Spring Conference](#) is May 4!). This country also has an amazing and affordable community college system—many schools offer writing, editing, and science refresher courses. Master's and doctoral programs also abound, especially in the RTP area. And even if you live somewhere that lacks the resources of a larger city, the Internet has made educational opportunities global and provided course formats that allow flexibility in terms of time, budget, and work schedule. No matter how experienced we are, we can always learn something new or remind ourselves of something important we've forgotten