



CAROLINA CONNECTIONS

Carolinas Chapter—American Medical Writers Association

Spring 2006

President’s Message

I am happy to report that this spring has been a busy and productive one for the chapter. We had a record participation at the Spring Conference (see page 5), and we have been enjoying well-attended networking lunches and dinners (page 3). In May, a group went to the NC office of the State Medical Examiner in Chapel Hill (page 4), and this month we’ll have a night of fun at a Durham Bulls game (see below).

If we haven’t seen you at an event yet, please join us! Your participation benefits the whole community—whether you think it does or not. For those of you who are interested in serving the community, we have several opportunities. If you have a story topic that you’d like to write-up for our newsletter, contact [Pat French](#). Writing for the newsletter is an easy way to get writing clips for prospective clients or employers. In addition, chapter elections will be held next month. Serving as a chapter officer is a great way to broaden your network both locally and nationally. Please contact me or one of the other chapter officers if you’re interested in serving.

If you have ideas for programs, please send them my way. It’s important to me that we continue to have well-attended events that are valuable to you.

—Jennifer King

STC/AMWA Night at the Ballpark: Join Us!

There are still a few tickets left for the June 15th game between the Durham Bulls and the Buffalo Bisons, which AMWA Carolinas is sponsoring as a joint event with the local chapter of the Society for Technical Communication. Since it is also TIAA-CREF Family Night sponsored by the Durham *Herald-Sun*, hot dogs, french fries and popcorn are only \$1 each!

Email [Pat French](#) to obtain your **free** tickets to this fun event! The game starts at 7 pm, and the gates open at 6 pm.

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Breakfast Roundtables Announced

The schedule for the Breakfast Roundtables, part of October's 2006 Annual Conference in Albuquerque, have now been posted on the national [AMWA Website](#) (pdf file). The 63 available sessions cover a wide range of topics, from dealing with writer's block to balancing parenting and work and freelancing. Join your colleagues on Thursday and Friday morning to exchange ideas, experiences, and insights about topics affecting your professional life in an informal setting. Table agendas will be posted on the AMWA Website as they become available.

And don't miss the **Chapter Meet & Greet** on Thursday night—it's a great way for far-flung AMWA Carolinas members to meet each other!

Annual Conference Workshops Announced

The schedule for workshops for the Annual Conference has been posted on the national [AMWA Website](#) (pdf file). In all, there will be 67 Core Curriculum workshops, 17 Advanced workshops, and 11 noncredit workshops, including many new sessions. New Core Curriculum workshops include:

- Drug Interactions
- Introduction to Clinical Study Reports
- The Internet: How and Where to Find Information
- SAS for Medical Writers
- Effectively Searching Online Databases
- Issues Management
- Background to Writing Informed Consent Documents

These workshops provide writers, editors, and other communicators with a wide range of opportunities to broaden our knowledge and improve our business skills. The brochure will be available online on June 30, and registration (online only, this year) will open on July 17.

2006 Events Schedule

AMWA Carolinas has many important, informative, and fun events coming up in 2006. We hope to see you at one or more of these! Please see our [Website](#) for more details as more events are added.

June 15	STC/AMWA Night at the Durham Bulls (email Pat French for info)
July 6	Bimonthly networking lunch, Johnny Carino's, Durham
July 17	Online registration opens for AMWA National Conference
August 3	Bimonthly networking dinner, NeoChina, Cary. <u>Theme</u> : Writing for CME.
September 7	Bimonthly networking lunch, Johnny Carino's, Durham
October 5	Bimonthly networking dinner, NeoChina, Cary. <u>Theme</u> : TBA.
October 26-28	National AMWA Conference, Albuquerque, NM
November 2	Bimonthly networking lunch, Johnny Carino's, Durham
December 7	Bimonthly networking dinner, NeoChina, Cary. <u>Theme</u> : TBA.

Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About BELS: Highlights of April 6 Networking Dinner

Everyone who attended the April 6 networking dinner came away with more than takeout boxes of (very good) Chinese food: thanks to presenter Tracey Fine, AMWA Carolinas' treasurer, we also found out just about everything there is to know about becoming certified by the Board of Editors in the Life Sciences (BELS, www.bels.org).

The medical writing profession has been plagued since its inception by a lack of the standardized credentials common to other professions, making it difficult for prospective clients and employers to obtain, and prospective freelancers and employees to show, objective evidence of a minimum skill level in editing. In 1991, 10 science editors founded BELS in an attempt to correct these deficiencies. The organization now has members in the United States, Canada, and several European countries.

Fine explained that BELS offers 3 certifications: ELS, which indicates that an editor has passed the primary certification exam; ELS(D), which indicates diplomate status after peers have reviewed a portfolio of work; and ELS(H), an honorary status awarded to editors with distinguished careers. To be eligible to sit for the BELS exam, candidates must pay a \$25 application fee, a \$100 testing fee, and have:

- A bachelor's degree or equivalent from an accredited academic institution
- At least 2 years' experience editing manuscripts for grammar, punctuation, syntax, logic, organization, consistency, and persuasiveness of the message
- Three letters of recommendation from people who can verify your work record

BELS supplies candidates with a study guide and a practice test, after which candidates have 3 years to take the examination (unsuccessful candidates can repeat the test for an additional fee later). The examination is a 3-hour, multiple-choice test in English that assesses how well the candidate ensures clarity and internal consistency in form, logic, usage, and organization; detects and corrects errors in punctuation, grammar, word choice, syntax, consistency, and numeric content and data; edits tables and illustrations; uses units of measure and scientific terms; adheres to a publisher's instructions; and understands the principles and ethics of scientific inquiry, writing, and publishing in the sciences. Although its name suggests otherwise, the test covers all scientific disciplines, such as geology and physics.

Passing the BELS examination brings several benefits, said Fine. First, the new ELS becomes a member of BELS, which offers the immediate benefits of a member newsletter, freelance listings, jobs listing, a listserv, a BELS breakfast and dinner at annual AMWA and Council of Science Editor (CSE) conferences, respectively. The other benefits of being "board-certified" might take longer to manifest themselves, but according to Fine, it has already helped her business greatly—she can now offer the ELS certification as evidence that she can provide good value for her clients' money. Just as BELS' founders intended.

—Pat French

Pat French is the newsletter editor and Web boss for AMWA Carolinas and principal of Left Lane Communications in Chapel Hill.

AMWA Carolinas' Visit to the NC Medical Examiner's Office

On Friday, May 12, North Carolina's Chief Medical Examiner (CME), Dr. John Butts, led a dozen AMWA members on a tour of the Office of the CME and discussed the Office's duties and history.

Dr. Butts explained that in North Carolina, the Medical Examiner System is a network of over 600 medical doctors throughout NC who voluntarily devote their time, energy, and medical expertise to see that suspicious, unusual or unnatural deaths are adequately investigated. Essentially, they are charged by the state with determining that every human death in NC receives a medical explanation for why it happened. For most people, this explanation comes from the decedent's physician, who is able to attest that the person died while under the physician's care and that the cause of death was a previously diagnosed condition. But for about 9000 deaths annually in NC (about 1/6 of the total), the medical examiners will be called upon to investigate. These deaths include:

- All cases in which the decedent has no attending physician to certify the cause of death (these constitute about half of the medical examiner's cases)
- Sudden, unexpected deaths not reasonably related to known previous disease
- Deaths during surgical or anesthetic procedures
- Public health hazards (such as acute contagious disease or epidemic)
- Poisonings or suspicion of poisoning
- Those in police custody, jail or prison
- Deaths occurring in unknown, unnatural, or suspicious circumstances
- Violent deaths
- Deaths from disasters
- Traumatic deaths
- Accidental deaths
- Suicides
- Homicides

Additionally, the medical examiner can order an investigation if he or she determines that it is "advisable and in the public interest" to determine the cause of death in a particular case.

Most medical examinations include inspecting the body (preferably, at the site of death), drawing blood samples, issuing a death certificate, and filing a report (and blood samples) with the CME. The medical examiner on the scene will also determine whether an autopsy is required. For the 44% of cases that do require an autopsy, the medical examiner will refer the case to a board-certified forensic pathologist. Forensic pathologists are also called in for cases involving complex injuries, decomposition, or decedents whose identity is unclear.

Dr. Butts explained that despite the high-tech changes in medical practice over the last few decades, MEs use essentially the same techniques to conduct autopsies now that they did 30 years ago. The medical advances of recent decades rarely offer an advantage over older techniques when the subject is, as Dr. Butts delicately pointed out, already beyond pain or injury, and nothing is too invasive or destructive.

The ME system in NC operates on a shoestring budget. Most medical examiners and forensic pathologists working for the state system are physicians who volunteer to take on these additional duties for deaths that occur in their areas. County governments pay the examiners \$100 per medical examination and \$1000 for an autopsy. Each volunteer medical examiner investigates about few dozen deaths per year.

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CME's Office, —*cont'd.*

The CME's office is located on the top floors of the Brinkhous-Bullitt building on the UNC-Chapel Hill campus. The prison-manufactured furnishings are serviceable but spare, and the hallways are crammed at every turn with stacks upon stacks of file boxes. The only luxury that the Examiner's office enjoys is a panoramic view of Chapel Hill from the picture window in the autopsy suite on the 11th floor (several stories above any possible onlookers). Dr. Butts gazed at the window and noted that it is very helpful for getting through what the staff needs to do. He said that when the office relocates to Raleigh some time in the next few years, they probably won't have a window anymore. He will miss it, he said.

For more information on the Medical Examiner system in NC, visit: <http://www.ocme.unc.edu/>. And perhaps write your state legislator and ask him or her to allocate funding for a window in the CME's next autopsy suite.

Thank you to Jenny Walker for coordinating this very educational event.

— *Maria Oyaski*

Maria Oyaski is a freelance regulatory and scientific writer in Durham.

2006 Annual Chapter Spring Conference Highlights

The 2006 AMWA Carolinas Spring Conference was a great success, however measured. For example, attendance was up 28% this year, and included 60 attendees from Florida, Georgia, Maryland, New Jersey, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, in addition to those representing the Carolinas. The most popular of the 4 courses offered was a new entry, the Electronic Common Technical Document (eCTD), in which almost half of the participants were enrolled. The other 3 courses, Basic Grammar and Usage II, Organizing the Biomedical Paper, and Advanced Writing, also were very well received.

The welcoming reception, held at the Friday Center the night before the conference, also was enjoyed by all who attended.

Thank you to our wonderful workshop leaders—AMWA Carolinas members Peggy Boe and Nancy Taylor and past AMWA President Marianne Mallia—for offering their time and expertise, and to the participants for making this event so successful. See you next year!

About the AMWA Carolinas Chapter

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