



## **From the Editor's Desk: Is the Pen Mightier than the Bomb?**

by Barry Drees

*" 'The best thing for being sad,' Merlin advised the fatherless young Arthur, 'is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling . . . you may miss your only love, you may see the world about devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honour trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then—to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the thing . . . ' "*

*TH White, The Once and Future King*

I think that everyone must have been affected in some way by the terrible terrorist attack in the USA in September with the horrific loss of life of people of all ages, races, religions and nationalities. And now the world is bracing for the challenges of an uncertain aftermath. News magazines have discussed these events from every imaginable angle and in unremitting detail, but it seems as if **every** magazine or journal I have looked into seems to have at least some kind of comment. But TWS? What possible contribution can a medical writing journal make to this subject. Well, at the risk of sounding trite, let me make the humble suggestion that scientific writers have an important role to play in combating the ignorance that is the fertile breeding ground for the fanatacism that leads to terrorist violence.

After the horror of this event, it seems as if the entire civilised world has begun to discuss what can be done about terrorism. The military people are telling us that this will be a "new kind of war" and that the world should prepare for a struggle which could last a long time. Those of a more political ilk, argue that we will never rid the world of terrorism without addressing the political problems that lead to the anger and frustration that inspires people to sacrifice their lives for a belief. However, I believe that history shows us that neither of these approaches will truly lead to the elimination of this threat. Rather, I believe that what is needed, and it is unfortunately a very long-term solution, is education, and in particular, science education.

Let's face it, terrorism comes from irrational passions and irrational passions arise most easily in an atmosphere of ignorance. By focusing on Islamic terrorists, we blind ourselves to the universals shared by all terrorists. If we consider the anti-government terrorists in the USA who executed the bombing attack in Oklahoma City a few years ago, it becomes evident that terrorism can arise anywhere where there is deep and fundamental ignorance about the world and how it works. There does seem to be a relationship between terrorism and ignorance, particularly scientific ignorance. A scientifically literate populace seems to be critical as schooling alone is apparently not enough (the word "Taliban" is variously translated as "Students" or "Seekers of truth" and refers to the fact that the founders of the Taliban were theology students).

## **The Write Stuff**

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### **From the Editor's Desk**

And who are some of the most important people for increasing scientific literacy in the world? You guessed it, scientific communicators, and that includes medical writers. As I have discussed elsewhere [1], although science teachers obviously have an important role to play in fighting scientific illiteracy, nothing will really be achieved without doing something to maintain scientific knowledge and interest after school and encourage scientific literacy in the population as a whole, rather than just in school children.

Now I'm not so naïve as to think that medical writers working within the pharmaceutical industry are going to do anything about fanatical terrorist violence tomorrow. But as even George W Bush acknowledges, this is not going to be a short struggle, and in the long term, one of our most promising strategies has to be the fighting of scientific ignorance. It is in that struggle that we have an important role to play, wherever and however we contribute. So next time you find yourself hacking away through the thicket of an impenetrable study plan text, take a moment to reflect on the importance of scientific communication to the world and your part, however small, in furthering that goal.

Certainly this is a time filled with challenging situations. In this issue we present two very challenging professional situations experienced recently by EMWA members and how they dealt with them. Even if some of us will never be working mothers or (hopefully) experience workplace bullying, it is always helpful to know how others have met such challenges and overcome them. Perhaps, they can even inspire us to rise to meet our own challenges, whatever they are, with hope and confidence. It might help to remember: "*The Chinese ideograms for the words 'crisis' and 'opportunity' are the same*" [2].

#### **References:**

1. Drees, B. Can medical writing save western civilization? Write Now 1999: p4.
2. Rosenberg D, Gegax TT, Lipper T. War on terror. Newsweek 29 Oct 2001: p27.

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***The editorial board of TWS and the members of the Executive Committee would like to extend their condolences to any EMWA, AMWA, AuMWA members, or indeed anyone involved in scientific communication anywhere in the world who have suffered personal losses from the terrorist attacks and subsequent related violence all over the world.***