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Key tips for writing and preparing a high quality conference abstract or poster



Jane Fraser, Louise Fuller, and Georgina Hutber: *Creating Effective Conference Abstracts and Posters in Biomedicine: 500 Tips for Success*. Radcliffe Publishing Ltd, 2009. ISBN 978-1846193118. 21.99 GBP. 146 pages.

Writing abstracts and posters for conferences is, for many medical writers in the medical communications area, a very common

request. When you begin your career as a medical writer, writing abstracts is often considered an area where you can learn how to hone your medical writing abilities, and be closely monitored through manager review and feedback. However, rarely will you be presented with documentation explaining how best to write abstracts. This book sets out useful tips and passes on first-hand experience of the common pitfalls in this field of medical writing. Writing abstracts is specifically dealt with in the first half of the book and poster writing in the remaining sections.

Considering that the poster relies on the abstract being accepted by the conference organisers, time should be spent preparing a high quality, suitable abstract which offers the best chance of the work being accepted by the conference organisers. The authors of the book outline the steps you need to follow when writing your conference abstract from the very beginning through to submission including information relating to electronic submission of abstracts. The information explains how to address authorship, and select the correct conference, as well as accessing and following submission guidelines and complying with the deadline for submission. The authors explain that one of the worst mistakes is to submit a “confusing or badly constructed abstract.” To help achieve the well written and organised abstract they also provide insight into the planning, structure and title of your abstract. This is all very useful information for a new writer and applicable to many other related medical writing areas.

The second part of the book deals with all you need to know once your well written abstract is accepted, and has lots of tips for preparing an eye catching poster. There are sections on content and lay out of posters. Examples of poster templates are provided and web addresses given where both landscape and portrait poster templates can be downloaded. There is even a section dealing with how to get your poster printed and transporting it to the conference. Something I

have not yet come across is an ‘e-poster’ which the authors describe as a “web page document submitted and designed online.” An e-poster allows you to incorporate videos as part of your poster presentation and will be viewed at the conference on a computer screen.

Written in an easy to follow style, the book can be used as a source of individual tips or read as complete sections devoted to individual topics. Although the book is written with academic researchers in mind it is also useful for professional medical writers, particularly those with little or no experience who feel they might need some extra help.

Alison McIntosh

Loughborough, UK
aagmedicalwriting@btinternet.com

Fraud and Misconduct in Biomedical Research



Wells F and Farthing M (eds)
Price £45.00, 978-1-85315-786-8,
300pp, paperback, September 2008

There must be a word for it. A person who spreads stories of nefarious deeds is a scandalmonger, but I can't bring to mind a word for the counterpart—someone who enthusiastically seeks out and devours spicy tales of dishonourable conduct. Human being might just cover it.

For most human beings, then, the temptation when picking up this fourth edition of what has become the standard work on fraudulent or flawed research is to head straight away for the juicy bits. A mistake.

While Frank Wells' chapter *Historical aspects of research misconduct: Europe* relates details of fraud, plagiarism and straightforward fiction, including previously unpublished details of the notorious Pearce case, is irresistible, the book will reward a more systematic approach. The Pearce case, by the way, is an extraordinary example of deception bordering on fantasy and the perils of gift authorship. Malcolm Pearce, a consultant gynaecologist, senior lecturer at a leading London teaching hospital and an assistant editor on the *British Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* reported a case of an embryo from an ectopic pregnancy being re-implanted—resulting in a successful birth. Problem >

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- > number one—the patient never existed, and problem number two—Professor Geoffrey Chamberlain, editor-in-chief of the *BJOG* and head of Pearce's department, accepted co-authorship. It is difficult to meet those tricky old criteria for authorship when the case is fictitious. But I'm falling into the trap of cherry-picking the scandalous bits.

Back to the book. The editors have structured the fourth edition differently from earlier versions. While still a compilation of essays from distinguished and expert contributors, the aim has been to create more of a standard text with an appeal to students and teachers of medical research and publication ethics, as well as academics and those of us from a more commercial background. In fact, anyone with an interest in ensuring the highest standards of conduct in research will benefit from reading this book.

Section one, then, sets the scene with contributions that define terms and describe the ethical issues in research and publishing. Richard Smith's insight on ethical issues in the publication process is remarkably comprehensive, covering topics from anonymity for individual subjects in case reports to the business ethics of journals. Based on his experience as editor of the *British Medical Journal*, Smith is unafraid to attack the odd sacred cow. Peer review, he says, is, "slow, expensive, a lottery, hopeless at detecting error and fraud, prone to bias and easily abused." Moreover, there is no evidence that it provides benefits and yet science remains wedded to peer review.

Ana Marušić, editor in chief of the *Croatian Medical Journal* addresses the role of peer review in detecting fraud in more detail. She draws a similar conclusion "the problem of scientific misconduct cannot ultimately be solved by better peer review or more stringent editorial processes."

So how is research misconduct to be prevented or detected? EMWA's own Liz Wager provides a most thorough overview of good publication practice including descriptions of the various codes and guides (including a mention of EMWA's 'ghostwriting' code of conduct). However, she complains that guidelines are fragmented and there is a lack of training for researchers on publication ethics.

The largest section of the book, comprising six contributions, looks at approaches to the detection of research misconduct. The chapter I found most intriguing (and I am a seriously gifted non-statistician) was Stephen Evans' "Can statistical analysis reveal research misconduct?"

The answer is yes. Moreover, statistical analysis can sometimes provide such convincing evidence of misconduct that no corroboration is needed.

However, it is most apparent that the majority of cases of research misconduct come to light through the activity of a whistleblower. Consider the poor whistleblower.

Gunsalus and Rennie report on a US Commission on Research Integrity series of meetings. At one, a succession of young scientists, all female, recounted their experiences. "Each had blown the whistle on a colleague whom she suspected of research misconduct. Each had stuck to her guns

through a long-drawn-out and bitter process. Each had endured ostracism and retaliation. For each, the event had effectively ended her career as a scientist."

Gunsalus and Rennie provide practical advice on handling whistleblowers that, I suppose, could improve their prospects. Nevertheless, I couldn't help thinking about the plight of a medical writer who spots some of the statistical anomalies described by Stephen Evans. Blow the whistle? I hope and assume that the sponsoring company would be grateful, though, having read of the universally grim experiences of whistleblowers who were totally vindicated, I can't help having some reservations.

Geoff Hall

retired freelance, London, UK
geoffreyhall@aol.com

Transparency and whistleblowers

Transparency is a major theme in the 1 August 2009 issue of the *BMJ*. Articles include one by Jane Cassidy that traces the fate of 4 whistleblowers and indicates that the whistleblower often suffers more than the organisation that is exposed. Other articles highlight the relationships between governmental agencies and the large producers that lobby them. Dealings between the bodies occur mostly out of view and a call is made for them to be routinely documented to allow public scrutiny. Of particular interest to medical writers, Rosalind L. Smyth reports on making information about clinical trials publicly available.

Greed in the pharma industry and among doctors is depressing

The following are the opening sentences of a report about a drug marketing plan released by the US Senate during the course of its investigations which was published in the *New York Times* on 1st September 2009.

"The pharmaceutical industry has developed thousands of medicines that have saved millions of lives, but it has also used its marketing muscle to successfully peddle expensive pills that are no more effective than older drugs sold at a fraction of the cost.

No drug better demonstrates the industry's salesmanship than Lexapro, an antidepressant sold by Forest Laboratories. And a document quietly made public recently by the Senate's Special Committee on Aging demonstrates just how Forest managed to turn a medicinal afterthought into a best seller."

Source: <http://tinyurl.com/lufz8v>