



View from the Past

by Mike Matthews

I still maintain that I was the one who started EMWA one day by lifting the phone and calling round every European drug company I could think of until I found some other medical writers. It was 1986 and I had just returned from my first AMWA meeting in San Francisco. I was weary of feeling like a curiosity in my working environment and energised by the richness of the AMWA experience, even though my workshop exercise on audio-visual presentations had been comprehensively rubbished by the rest of the workshop attendees - fair enough, because they knew what they were talking about whereas I was taking a bold stab at the exotic.

Stephen de Looze and I recognised each other's European accents among the 400 or so American ones during the meeting and got together back home afterwards. We were both working for big companies at the time (Stephen still is) and sponsorship for an AMWA meeting was not a problem. It could be sensibly tied in with a visit to the US on company business. I will be forever grateful to ICI, my then employer, for sending me to San Francisco. That first AMWA meeting confirmed my choice of career as valid, full of potential and absolutely right for me.

But when I got home I was still alone, professionally speaking. So I got on the phone. The first meeting of about half a dozen European medical writers was held at ICI Alderley Park, UK, and the invitees included myself and Jane Mitchell (both then of ICI), Brenda Moore (then of Glaxo), Linda Dearden (then of Boots), Stephen de Looze (Hoechst), and delegates (as far as I remember) from Fisons and Janssen. We were all mainstream bread-and-butter industry writers. I doubt whether any of us knew much about the rest of the profession at the time.

It was a modest affair alright, but it was the true beginning, oh my children, of the thriving organisation that is EMWA today. The following year I talked Fisons into hosting a meeting of about a dozen delegates in the UK, and the year after I was proud to be a non-UK delegate from my new job with Sanofi in France to make the opening remarks at the first truly international meeting, hosted by SmithKline Beecham in Brussels. The long-running discussion about how (and indeed whether) EMWA should be associated with AMWA started then. It completely polarised the group. One writer berated us for railroading through a motion in support of the link and swore (as I remember) never to set foot ever again, etc. etc. etc.. He got over it, though. I saw him in Madrid at the 1998 meeting.

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Indeed, many of the originals are still coming to EMWA meetings. After several more company-sponsored AMWA and EMWA meetings, I missed a few (I was a busy but parsimonious freelancer for four years) but I got back into the loop at the Edinburgh meeting in '97 and also made it to Madrid in '98. What struck me most on my return to EMWA was that the new writers I met at these meetings were saying exactly the same things I had been saying of AMWA in 1986: firstly it's a great boost to feel that you belong to a group of like-minded people (however eccentric) and secondly it's a great benefit to learn from the more experienced among them.

Nowadays, European medical writers take it for granted that all of this exists relatively close to home. That is very important. AMWA was the model for EMWA, particularly in its provision of training workshops, and we should never forget that, but AMWA cannot provide for the needs of those European writers who do not benefit from big-company sponsorship for trips to the US. And any professional organisation needs the diversity of experience and view that comes from having members from across the whole spectrum of its activity, not just the heavyweights or the big-company people.

Having grown from parochial beginnings, but with links to the US through AMWA, we are now also the home organisation for writers from far north, south, east and west of Europe, which is how this series of "View From..." articles got started, and we Europe-based members benefit from this source of diversity of experience too. But what about the fourth dimension: time? The view from the past is special. It belongs to but few of us. The view from the future is going to be better still. It belongs to us all.

Mike Matthews
Director of Medical Affairs
ICON Clinical Research
Kings Court, Broadway
Winchester, Hants SO23 9BE
UK
matthewsm@iconuk.com
Tel: (+44) 1962 826 000

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1. The e-mail address for the Freelance Opportunity was given incorrectly. The correct address is:
Monique@luz.com
See corrected advertisement on page 23 this issue for complete address.
2. The *AMWA Journal* reference for Robert J Bonk's article, "Reversing the Report-Production Process When Teaching Pharmaceutical Writing" was deleted from the final copy. It is as follows:
AMWA Journal, 1998; 13 (1) 17-19.