



Why Medical Writing?

by Adam Jacobs

I have always wanted to be a medical writer, ever since I was a little boy. When, at the age of five, all the other kids in the playground were saying that they wanted to be train drivers or astronauts when they grew up, I told them that I needed a career with more job satisfaction, so I wanted to be a medical writer.

OK, I lied. I had never even heard of medical writers until about 6 years ago, much less thought of becoming one. I expect my story is fairly typical: I started out as a research scientist, but after a while I started to ask myself why, after spending all those years working towards my PhD, I was doing a job with a dreadful salary and lousy career prospects. Having come to the conclusion that writing about science was at least as much fun as doing it, I found a job translating foreign scientific documents into English (an excellent training for any writer: having to ponder over the precise meaning of each sentence really teaches you what language is all about). After a couple of years of translating mostly medical documents, it was a natural enough transition to become a medical writer.

Now, in my early thirties, and in my second job as a medical writer, I have finally decided that I really do want to be a medical writer when I grow up. I have found a career that I enjoy: I get to keep in touch with the latest developments in medical research, I feel appreciated by colleagues and clients alike, and I am paid far more than ever I was as a scientist. As an added bonus, I never have to go to work in the mornings wondering if anybody is going to let anything particularly smelly or toxic out of the fume cupboard today (one of the highlights of my career as an organic chemist was a night in hospital after a little accident with some phosgene).

But, until last month, there was always a little nagging doubt at the back of my mind. Is it a useful career? Scientists in laboratories are, one hopes, pushing back the frontiers of knowledge and helping to make the world a better place. Those actively involved in the clinical research that I spend much of my time writing about are helping to apply that knowledge and find better ways to fight disease. The physicians who then make use of that research to offer their patients the best available treatment are also unquestionably doing a useful job. But what about medical writers? Where do we fit into all this? Do we really help to make the world a better place, or are we no better than accountants and lawyers, just muscling in on the action to grab our share of the loot?

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Last month, I attended the XX1st CINP (Collegium Internationale Neuropsychopharmacologicum) Congress in Glasgow, along with several thousand psychiatrists from around the world. I discovered two important things there. First, psychiatrists smoke a lot. I assume they hope that by encouraging smoking, they will ensure that those making use of healthcare services will be more likely to visit their colleagues in,

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for example, oncology or respiratory medicine, and so be less likely to bother a psychiatrist. Second, medical writers do a job which is not only useful, but essential. One of the striking things about the talks given at the conference was the difference between those in the main sessions, where the speakers had mostly prepared their own presentations, and those in the industry-sponsored sessions, where the sponsors could afford to employ professional help in producing the talks. The latter talks were of a consistently high standard. They followed a logical sequence, data were presented clearly, and as a result, it was easy to follow what the speaker was saying.

The contrast with the talks prepared without professional help was staggering. I am not saying that all the speakers who prepared their own talks were poor communicators, and I would certainly not wish to suggest that psychiatrists are worse than members of any other branches of the medical and scientific professions. However, it made me realise that communicating medical research was a very different skill to doing it. Some of the speakers were no doubt experts in their field, but clearly had no idea how to present their research findings to an audience. One talk consisted of slide after slide of dense tables of data in a very small font. The research might have been very interesting, but I will never know, because I had difficulty keeping awake during the talk, and, in common with at least half the audience, left before the end. One would have hoped that a psychiatrist, of all people, should realise that few people have the mental capacity to take in data from 15 × 20 tables at the rate of one table every couple of minutes.

However, on reflection, is it surprising that many of the talks were less than perfect? Psychiatrists, like all clinicians, must put the welfare of their patients first. The research process itself also makes considerable demands on their time, so preparing lectures cannot be given too high a priority. Moreover, few clinicians or scientists receive any training in effective communication. Scientific and clinical research is becoming ever more difficult and sophisticated, requiring increasing amounts of expertise from those involved in it. It is probably no more realistic to expect all clinicians to be expert communicators than it would be to expect someone such as myself to carry out open heart surgery.

Scientific and clinical research is necessary and important, but it is of little use if its results are presented so badly that the audience loses interest and falls asleep or walks away, so that few people ever become aware of the research. I came away from the conference happy that any increase in my risk of developing lung cancer from four days of heavy passive smoking was more than offset by the joy in my discovery that medical writers do an essential job. There is a real need for professional communicators, who do understand how to present complex research in a way which is interesting, and who are willing to devote their professional lives to that process of communication. In these days of increasing complexity in medical research, I am sure that medical writers will become an ever more essential part of the process. If I meet a five-year-old who wants to be a medical writer when he or she grows up, I shall know we are making real progress.

Adam Jacobs,
53 Haslemere Avenue
Mitcham, Surrey CR4 3BA
UK