



View from the South: Medical Writing in South Africa

by Daleen Krige

Here, in the southernmost part of Africa, medical writing as a career is a largely unknown choice. To understand the present situation, you need some background knowledge about the pharmaceutical industry in South Africa. Most companies here are outposts of parent companies somewhere else on the globe (mostly Europe) and are situated in the Gauteng province (where Johannesburg is). Medical writers, albeit usually not known by that name, are mostly responsible for the package inserts and information sheets to accompany their company's products for marketing and/or information. Furthermore, these inserts were mainly written in the (previous) two official languages: English and Afrikaans (related to Dutch). Get the picture? Nothing much in terms of innovation.

Yet even before the coming of democracy and a more open policy regarding science and technology, companies in Europe found South Africa a very beneficial "testing ground". Not only was it far from rival companies in Europe (minimizing confidentiality risks), but it was, and still is inexpensive: the South African Rand is much weaker than most European currencies. That is one of the reasons for CROs mushrooming all over the country. I am working in one such CRO in Bloemfontein, in the "centre" of South Africa. My main assignment is to write study reports and prepare manuscripts for publication in appropriate medical journals. There are also pharmaceutical companies of local origin, doing research work in South Africa with their own in-house writers.

*To comfort: sometimes,
to acquaint: often,
to educate: always*

In a nutshell, that is the background and situation of medical writing in South Africa up to now, but what new challenges await us, in the twenty-first century? Firstly, the government policy has changed, and we now have **eleven** (11) official languages. There are many people, especially among the Black population, who do not understand Afrikaans at all and have an extremely weak knowledge of English. How are we going to accommodate medical writing in so many languages? Preparing patient information and package inserts promises to be a daunting task.

Yet another trend in the circles of the policy makers is the acknowledgement of traditional medicine and its improved status as a tool in primary health care. Especially since the WHO Alma Ata conference in 1978, there is growing support for either the **inclusive** system or the **integrated** system. In the inclusive system, allopathic and traditional medicines exist next to each other and both are considered legitimate. In the integrated system, a new system is created by the merging of allopathic and traditional medicines.

The Write Stuff

View from the South

Whichever of these systems is eventually implemented doesn't change the problems and responsibility of the medical writers. Perhaps the most pressing issue is the fact that *muti* (traditional medicine) is so widely used in an almost infinite variety of forms and very little knowledge exists about ingredients, potency, toxicity, etc. To be able to report accurately on these "treatments" is going to be a mammoth task, as the whole system, in the absence of any sophisticated physiological knowledge, serves primarily to comfort and alleviate symptoms rather than cure disease. This is not to say, however, that traditional treatments are not effective, but rather that they have different strengths and weaknesses from allopathic (Western) treatments. Should medical writing here bridge the gap and properly inform, educate and (perhaps) comfort? And if so, what are the appropriate methods for describing and presenting a system of medicine not based on double-blind clinical trials and p-values?

It may sound as if the new century is only going to confront us with problems, but this is surely not the case. It is very exciting to be here, in Africa, doing one's own bit to accurately report on matters of scientific interest and being able to break ground to benefit the larger community.

Daleen Krige
FARMOVS,
University of the Orange Free State
PO Box 339
Bloemfontein 9300
South Africa
gnfmdk@frm.uovs.ac.za
Tel: 0027-51-401-3105 Fax: 0027-51-447-1779