



Medical Writing Around the World: I. Scribbling in the Antipodes, Medical Writing in Australasia

by Peter Hobbins

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Those of us who live in Australasia (Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific islands) have long felt the 'tyranny of distance' that separates us from Europe and America. Our relatively small populations, however, mean that we rely to varying extents upon products and information imported from those regions, with medicine forming no exception. Not surprisingly, these circumstances mean that the medical writing environment in Australasia differs significantly from the European and American models. For instance, clinical trials and regulatory submissions for pharmaceuticals are generally adapted from global models, rather than generated *de novo*. As such, very few antipodean medical writers are engaged in writing up trial protocols, study reports, clinical papers or drug submissions. So what do the other thousand or so medical writers do 'down under'?

We are nothing if not varied. Journalism is a large employer, both in the lay and specialist medical press. Indeed, health continually rates highly as a topic of interest to Australian media consumers. There is also a competitive market for writing that addresses the needs of healthcare professionals for news, information, education and observation. Many who contribute to such publications are freelance writers: 10–20% of all medical writers here fall into that category.

Many physicians undertake writing as an adjunct to medicine; some cross over to full-time writing, but most find ways to juggle both communications and clinical careers. Nurses seem more likely to leap from ward to keyboard, and comprise a significant section of our fraternity. Nevertheless, many journalists who write with depth and clarity on medical and medico-political matters have backgrounds with little or no life-science training.

The other main employer of medical writers in Australasia is the healthcare industry, albeit usually via agencies. Pharmaceutical companies, for instance, are increasingly viewing Australia as a useful test market for promotional and educational strategies. Our audiences are seen as small and relatively homogenous models for the much larger European and American markets. In addition, a number of companies use Australia as a base for the South-East Asian region.

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As a consequence, the industry supports a surprising number of healthcare-focused advertising, education and public relations agencies. Moreover, those of us working in these industries are often relatively free to develop and test new concepts and products (although the spectre of globalisation always looms near). Australians as a rule are eager supporters of new technology, so medical writing here increasingly encompasses video, multimedia and internet-based applications of our craft. The New Zealand government, on the other hand, has fought publicly and bitterly with the pharmaceutical industry, claiming its small economy simply can't afford new drugs. As a result, pharma spending in that country has dwindled to a bare minimum, limiting support for both industry communications and advertising-driven media.

Our local organisation – the Australian Medical Writers Association (which we, like the Americans, shorten to AMWA) – currently boasts 260 members. Although these numbers may seem small in a global context, we still offer members networking, publications, education and a website (linked to the EMWA website). We are now actively seeking international links, particularly with medical writers in New Zealand and other Pacific nations, as well as investigating more formal ties with the European and American Associations.

For those contemplating a visit – or a more permanent excursion – to our corner of the globe, the medical writing market remains dynamic and varied, yet small enough for fresh ideas and different styles to make a noticeable impact. Just don't expect any kangaroos to greet you at the airport.

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II. Medical Writing in the Old World

by Barry Drees

In Europe, where most professions are represented by ancient guilds and trace their origins to the Roman empire or the middle ages, people usually react with puzzlement when I tell them that I am a medical writer. Although there has been what amounts to medical writing here for a long time, it is a relatively new concept as a specialized profession, as reflected in the fact that the European Medical Writers Association (EMWA) was founded only in 1991 from an impromptu meeting of European members of the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA). Medical writing got off to a somewhat slower start here in the Old World partly due to a more deeply entrenched tradition of authority in Europe, whereby only acknowledged experts are seen as capable of communicating about a subject, and partly due to a culture that is less oriented to media and advertising than that in the USA.

People who refer to themselves as medical writers in Europe tend to work for the pharmaceutical industry (as, for example, the majority of the EMWA membership). The other kinds of medical writers found in North America and Australia usually go by other names with their own organisations (the European Association of Science Editors, for example). Because medical writing is such a new profession, there are no specific degrees or paths of study one can follow to become a medical writer. Rather, medical writers in Europe tend to be former life science researchers, editors, or come from other jobs within the pharmaceutical industry. They therefore tend to be highly educated and have a significant input concerning scientific content in addition to the more traditional editing tasks such as style, grammar or spelling.

The job of medical writing in the pharmaceutical industry is multifaceted. One of the exciting things about this kind of writing is the very wide range of readers we need to write for, including scientists (publications), doctors and nurses (trial protocols), patients (patient information sheets), and national drug regulators (submission documentation). This requires great flexibility as a writer. Furthermore, although good interpersonal skills are required in any author-editor relationship, the medical writer working on a pharmaceutical industry project will often have to coordinate contributions from several different groups (statisticians, clinicians, investigators, regulatory specialists, etc.). In the process, we also tend to develop project management skills, keeping the various contributors happy and the projects on schedule.

One of the most distinguishing characteristics of Europe is the lack of a common language. Medical writers from North America or Australia often express surprise when I tell them that although I work in Germany, most of my writing is in English, the language used for multinational drug registrations in Europe. Thus, it is hardly surprising that three-quarters of the EMWA membership are native English speakers, many working in a foreign language environment. This can be used to the advantage of the medical writer when dealing with authors. I know from personal experience, as well as the AMWA workshop "The author-editor relationship", that medical writers still have difficulties being accepted by much of the scientific and medical establishments, especially in English-speaking countries. In continental Europe, however, we can always get an initial foot in the door via the chance to "just check the English". Thereafter, we can cure all the other common ills (inconsistency, incompleteness, poor presentation, etc.) and convince our clients of the value of our contribution. This also means that one-quarter of EMWA's membership has English as only a second or even third language. Addressing the issues and concerns of these members, and making EMWA an organisation that truly represents us all is a challenge EMWA is only beginning to face.

What lies ahead? One can hardly watch television or open a magazine today without seeing something about the information revolution. At the same time, everyone seems to bemoan the growing gap between scientists and the general public. Technical writers, such as ourselves, are in the exciting position of playing an influential role in both of these discussions and, thus, I foresee a secure and dynamic future for the profession, especially in a multi-lingual region such as Europe.