



Becoming a Non-native English-Speaking Freelance Medical Writer

by Annemieke Van Hest

When Hilde Joosen asked me to put some thoughts on paper about non-native medical writing, I was hesitant to agree because I was not sure if I would be able to contribute something new and meaningful to the ongoing discussion in TWS. But when I was driving home from a meeting with one of my well-respected sponsors, I thought that it might be a good idea to tell you how a Dutch native-speaking psychologist became a non-native English-speaking freelance medical writer. By telling you this little story, I want to illustrate what skills I think are essential for success as a medical writer, and that fluency in English is only part of it.

I certainly had no intention of becoming a medical writer when I went to university some 25 years ago. Frankly speaking, I had never heard of medical writing at that time, and, as I realise now, maybe the profession as such didn't exist back then. After a few months at university, I found out that my real interest was in physiology, psychopharmacology and statistics. So I spent the next couple of years in the animal laboratory, studying the relationship between brain and behaviour in rats. I did my PhD thesis on the effects of gonadal hormones on learning and memory in rats at the Netherlands Institute for Brain Research, and afterwards I joined a well established Belgian pharmaceutical company (no, not the company that Hilde is working for) as a group leader in preclinical pharmacology of the central nervous system. After having spent 10 years amidst rats, mice and pigeons, I was eager to learn how drugs were being further developed after they left the laboratory and I took up a job as a clinical research director at the Clinical Pharmacology Department within the same company. As a substantial part of the job consisted of contracting out Phase I volunteer studies, the next logical step for me was to join a rather small CRO that had been involved in some of the Phase I studies that I had set up. My job description said "medical writer", but being one of the seniors I was involved in almost every aspect of the process, and soon became interim head of the Biometrics Department, responsible for everything from data entry to the integrated medical and statistical report. Then there was a merger, the offices were moved, and I suddenly became freelance!

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Looking back, I dare say that the foundation of everything that I achieved as a writer later on was laid during my years at the Netherlands Brain Institute. In the first place, I became thoroughly familiar with all aspects of data analysis. I attended a SAS course, and handled and analysed all experimental data by myself. Support of a data management or statistical department was a luxury I could only dream of. One other extremely important skill that I acquired in those years was the ability to write an article. There

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was no special training course for that part of the job so, needless to say, the first few articles came back all blackened by the many, many valuable suggestions for improvement that reviewers and editors had scribbled in the margins. Even now, I quite often revert to their suggestions, which have been at the back of my mind ever since that time. But gradually I learned, and one paper after another was accepted and published. That was the time when writing really became fun!

The years I worked in the pharmaceutical industry were essential to come to a clear understanding of the drug development process in its broadest sense. I never did much medical writing at that time because most of the reports were contracted out, but I reviewed quite a lot of them, which was also rather instructive. At the time that I started writing clinical reports myself at the CRO that I mentioned, the ICH guideline E3: Structure and Content of Clinical Study Reports was being drafted, and I tried to follow that process as closely as possible. This transitional period put great demands on one's creativity and flexibility as a writer, in order to be able to produce a report that was fully compliant with the different sponsors SOPs and templates, but would not contradict the ICH guidelines once they became final. Two other things that I learned from that time and still consider prerequisites for successful medical writing: a client-

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centred approach, and never missing a deadline. A third skill that I acquired - how to negotiate prices - might not be essential, but there is also no harm in it for a freelance writer.

Having been responsible for the conduct of clinical trials myself, I can only see the report as the end product of a study that should demonstrate the sponsor's commitment to conducting clinical trials to the highest standards. A good clinical report adheres to SOPs and guidelines, is compliant with formatting requirements, and shows internal consistency and accuracy. Furthermore, it is complete, with a sufficient level of detail, easy to review, and, most of all, it must be acceptable to regulatory authorities worldwide. And last but not least, a good report is one that is also on time. To be able to fulfil all these requirements, a medical writer must possess many more skills than fluency in English alone. A good command of the language certainly is an advantage, but in the first place, this is not exclusively given to native speakers, and secondly, it is only one of the many skills that are needed to become a good medical writer.

Nowadays, as a freelance medical writer, I find pleasure in the contacts with different Sponsors, the diversity of therapeutic areas, and all the different styles of working. I never intended to write for a living, but once I became a non-native English-speaking freelance medical writer, I decided to stay one for life.

Annemieke Van Hest
author@euronet.nl

Postscript: Annemieke reports that she's having difficulties with her tax declaration in The Netherlands. These people claim that medical writing is not a profession, but "a gift" (a talent), and that, as a result, she will have to pay more taxes...! Another "extra" difficulty for those rare non-native English-speaking medical writers, perhaps? On the other hand, however, it sounds as if we're really special!