



The Physical Side: Are You Indisposed as a Medical Writer?

by Diana Klein-Franke

Do you remember from bygone days someone yelling: "Don't hunch your shoulders" or "Stand up straight" or "Don't slouch". That someone was most probably your mother and as - usual - she was right.

Are you curled up on the sofa while reading this issue of TWS? Or sitting at your desk? Are you watching TV? Or on the bus or train travelling to work? Wherever you are at this moment, take a few minutes to read this article and answer the following.

Do you have or suffer from any of the following?

- Tightness, discomfort, stiffness, soreness or a burning sensation in your hands, wrists, fingers, forearms, elbows, back, or shoulders.
- Tingling, coldness or numbness in your hands.
- Clumsiness or loss of coordination in your hands.
- Pain that wakes you up at night.
- The need to massage your hands, wrists, and arms.

If you answered yes to any of the above, you may be indisposed and should be concerned about your physical well-being.

As medical writers, many of us spend at least 5 hours sitting on a chair, at a desk, working with a computer, keyboard and mouse. There may still be a few of us who still use a typewriter for particular forms which cannot be scanned. How about those of us who give lectures and use pointers while explaining the ins and outs of tables and graphs, profit and loss? Not forgetting almost each and every one of us who reach out and pick up a phone.

Many of us (myself included) have a bad habit of tucking the telephone between our shoulder and ear in order to type and talk on the phone simultaneously. This can cause immense pain in the neck, shoulder and arms.

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How is the heating or air-conditioning in your office? Are your arms and hands too warm or cold? Cold muscles and tendons are at a much greater risk of strain, as are overheated muscles.

Look at the chair you are using. Is it the correct height? This is imperative for our physical and intellectual well-being as medical writers. As we spend most of the day sitting down, we must ensure that our basic office equipment is optimally positioned. Try the following exercise.

Sit on your chair and touch your computer keyboard. Are your hands placed in a way that enables your fingers to remain diagonally positioned at the keyboard? Where is your keyboard - is it at a lower position than your monitor? It is extremely important for your shoulders, arms and fingers that the keyboard - the most important part of our office equipment - is at the correct height. If your keyboard is on the same table as your monitor see if you can install a lower "shelf" They can be purchased for a reasonable price in furniture shops or at your local "Do-it-yourself" shop.

Now stand up and measure your inner leg (from the inner knee to the floor - with shoes on, since some shoes with higher heels can have a big effect on this distance). Measure the distance from the seat of your chair to the floor. Is it higher or lower than the measurement taken of your inner leg? It is good if it is higher, as this will reduce muscle strain. If it is lower, you should increase the height of your seat. If you are still not sitting comfortably, you should consider getting a special cushion for your chair.

Now that I have your attention and you are aware of your chair and keyboard, look at your feet. How are they placed on the floor? Are they both on the floor? How are your ankles and toes, any cramps? All you may need is a foot rest. There are quite a lot of different types around. You basically need to try them out. The angle of some of them can even be adjusted.

After proofreading a book about the occupational ailments of musicians, I began to think about medical writers. Aren't we as medical writers engaged in an "artistic" occupation? Just as musicians need to sit and work and maintain a correct posture, so do we in our daily work. We are also using our shoulders and necks, and we should also be aware of ourselves and our posture. I do hope that a future conference will hold a discussion or presentation about the physical side of medical writing. I am sure it will help many of us, and make us all realise what our bodies are telling us.

In order to avoid repetitive strain injury, try to pay attention to your body. Although as writers we're employed more for our brains than our bodies, when you're in pain it is hard to use your brain to the best of its abilities. Pain is your body's way of telling you that there is a problem, but learning what is comfortable or awkward for your body **before** you are in pain may prevent injury and ill-health, and help ensure that your brain can deliver top performance for a long time.

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