



From the Editor's Desk: Interpersonal Working Relationships

by Barry Drees

Greetings fellow members,

Like many other things these days, the role of medical writers in the pharmaceutical industry seems to be changing. Gone are the days when medical writers could quietly sit at their terminals, working away in solitude and quiet obscurity. When I first started as a medical writer back in 1989, I was frequently asked in medical writing seminars why someone with such an outgoing personality like me had gone into a profession like medical writing. Apparently, the assumption was that being a medical writer required absolutely no interpersonal skills, since we worked in complete isolation. I always pictured the scene from the novel *1984*, where the protagonist received his assignments through a tube and when he was finished with them he inserted them into another tube, never once seeing another human being (and this was **before** he got tortured!). People seemed to think that having good interpersonal skills or an outgoing personality meant that one had to go into project management or marketing.

As I have discussed in this column on other occasions, things have changed! These days, all one hears about is the team aspect of what we do. In fact, last year's Drug Information Association meeting "Survival Strategies for Medical Writers" (TWS 1999; 8 [4]: 3-4) was dominated by presentations stressing the importance of interpersonal skills in working in teams to complete writing projects on time. Not only does one now have to deal with the actual person commissioning the work, but one is very often placed into large, multi-disciplinary teams where one must interact with a whole range of other professionals including experts in pre-clinical, medical, marketing, statistics, programming, project management, publishing, etc. Thus I am thrilled to present our theme for this issue of "Interpersonal Working Relationships", where we explore a few of these situations.

***I was frequently asked in
medical writing seminars
why such an outgoing
personality like me had
gone into a profession like
medical writing.***

There tends to be a sense of fatalism about interpersonal skills however. Everyone seems to think that you are either born with them or the situation is hopeless. Having attended a fair number of team-building workshops over the years, as well as having gained a lot of experience working in teams both professionally as a medical writer and on backpacking or trekking expeditions, I've been amazed how effective a few simple principles can be to help build good teams and solve interpersonal conflict. Even if you are born with outstanding interpersonal skills, making every effort to be open and honest in communicating with your team members and making sure that everyone is working toward a common, well-defined goal can work wonders.

From the Editor's Desk

Probably the most essential thing for good teamwork is respecting the other team members and their contributions, even when their style or personality is different from your own. Just as a good coach or trainer recognises and respects the different ways each member contributes to a successful sports team, a good team leader knows how to motivate and get the best from each member of their team. And this holds not just for the leader, but for all team members. As Hilde Joosen wrote me in a comment on the "Celebrating Linguistic Diversity" issue, "building each other up is the key to success". I believe there is a strong link between the themes of this issue and the last issue. If we can move beyond just respecting diversity and strive to celebrate diversity, we can go a long way to improving our interpersonal skills and making ourselves better teammates or project leaders and thus better medical writers.

This topic also proved a winner in soliciting article submissions. In fact, the response was so great that we decided to expand it over two issues. Thus, we will look at working relationships themselves in this issue and we will examine the peculiarities of working with particular kinds of people and professions in the following issue. And

If we can move beyond just respecting diversity and strive to celebrate diversity, we can go a long way to improving our interpersonal skills and making ourselves better leaders

since one can learn the most about oneself through the eyes of another, the next issue will also feature a guest article from a statistician on working with medical writers.

And speaking of respecting differences, forging leadership skills, and promoting diversity, this brings me to some more exciting news about the next issue. For the first time in 2½ years, TWS will be edited by someone

other than me. Yes, the long-awaited moment has arrived for the new deputy editor, Judi Proctor, to step in and edit her first issue! Although I will still retain some oversight and will help Judi if she needs it, the next issue will be hers in terms of concept and article solicitations. I, for one, am really looking forward to seeing TWS with someone else's vision.

Finally, I'd like to share some news about the continuing recognition of the quality of TWS, which also might act as an inducement to members to submit pieces for publication. I was recently approached by the contract research organisation Parexel (frequent EMWA sponsor, I might add) to use articles from TWS for commercial purposes. As some of you may not know, authors of articles published in TWS retain the copyright to their articles. Thus, as in this case, if someone wishes to reproduce an article, they must negotiate with the author for the rights to that article, not EMWA or TWS. So all you freelance writers, send me examples of your brilliance for us to publish and you will not only get free advertising for your writing skills, you might even be able to earn some cash in the process and pay off that Ferrari in the garage!

Barry Drees
Editor-in-Chief
Aventis Pharma
barry.drees@aventis.com

PS. Oh yes, I almost forgot, one final comment for our president Keith Veitch based on his last column: one – nil, and at Wembley no less!