

The Write Stuff



Medical journalism – a career move?

by Jo Whelan

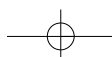
Bored with writing protocols or scientific papers? Fancy seeing your name in print? Then maybe you've thought about moving into medical and scientific journalism. There is continuing demand for good writers who can understand scientific stories and convey them in an interesting way. So what opportunities are out there, what skills do you need, and how easy is it for medical writers to move across into journalism?

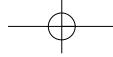
What do we mean by journalism? At one end of the spectrum is the investigative journalist, who looks behind the public face of companies, products or policies to dig out stories that would otherwise remain hidden. Then there are news reporters, covering stories as they break and often writing or broadcasting on their feet – or by the seat of their pants – to make that day's issue or bulletin. For some, these are the only true journalists. According to Michael Kenward, an ex-editor of *New Scientist*, "Science writing is about explaining complex ideas that nobody wants to keep secret; science journalism is about explaining things that everyone can understand but that some might prefer to keep buried." By this definition, much of what most science writers in the media do is just that – science writing. Even so, they are expected to maintain a critical approach. At the other end of the spectrum is public relations (PR). PR writers supply stories to the media as part of their client's communications strategy. At their best these articles can be informative and scientifically correct, but by their nature they lack independence. For the purposes of this article I will use the term "medical journalism" to describe journalism and science writing – but not PR – covering the life sciences.

A huge quantity of medical and scientific journalism is churned out each week by the various media. The scientific and medical press, consumer magazines, newspapers, radio and television, online news services and medical/scientific websites – all require writers, reporters and editors. Encouragingly for anyone wanting to break in to the area, many editors say good people are hard to find. So what are they looking for? PhDs and research experience can be a plus with the specialist scientific media, but elsewhere will score no more highly than a basic science degree. Curiosity, good general knowledge and the ability to pick up new concepts quickly are more important than in-depth expertise, especially when writing for a non-specialist audience.

You must, of course, be able to write well. The core writing and analytical skills needed by medical writers apply equally to journalism, but the emphasis is different. A dry summary of some clinical trial results is not a news report and would make a pretty turgid feature. Journalists must engage the reader's attention from the first paragraph, and keep it until the last. You are telling a story, not just setting down facts. It is interesting to take something you rate as a good piece of journalism and analyse why you found it interesting and how the writer kept you wanting to read on. Essential to this is knowing how to write for your market, a skill that some medical writers will already be practiced in. The

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same story needs to be told very differently depending on whether the audience are doctors, business managers, readers of the quality press or buyers of a weekly glossy.

So medical writing skills are a useful foundation for journalism. But moving between the two activities requires a definite change of mindset. It is a fact of life that as medical writers we write about the companies and products that pay our wages, and our quite legitimate aim is to further their interests (within ethical and regulatory guidelines, naturally). Journalism shouldn't be romanticised, but the ideal is to give the reader a balanced and objective view. This requires a questioning attitude and a healthy dose of scepticism. It is essential to look both behind and around the "facts" you are reporting. So, you see a press release from Kuritech Magiceuticals Inc. This young company has made a potential breakthrough in the fight against cancer, it reads. Its new compound, KM007, can completely eliminate tumours in mice. It's in a new class called wotsitase inhibitors, and extremely promising. Wow, you think, this is news. You ring the head of R&D at Kuritech. He explains about KM007 very persuasively and at great length. Your tape recorder runs out of memory and your head is going round. Nevertheless, you think you've got a story so you rephrase the press release, add some quotes from your interview and call the piece "New class of cancer drug cures mice".

You are about to send it to your editor when you stumble across the same story on a rival journal's website. It is entitled "Last chance for wotsitase inhibitors". It seems that several have worked in mice but all have left human tumours untouched. It cites a paper called "Possible reasons for the lack of wotsitase inhibitor efficacy in humans." Curiously, the Kuritech guy never mentioned it (he had a counter argument, but to his surprise you never asked.) The article also quotes an expert from Cancer Research UK, who says she'd be very surprised if KM007 could overcome the problems inherent to its class. Finally, it mentions that if the drug fails then Kuritech will go bust. You come over cold and start to feel sick. Shakily, you retrieve your article from the outbox and begin to rewrite it.

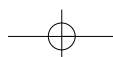
The near-disaster above would have been averted by observing a few basic rules:

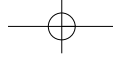
- never take press releases, corporate publications or newspaper/magazine articles at face value;
- get the background on your story;
- ask searching questions when you interview people;
- always get an independent expert to comment;
- be aware of people's motivations, agendas, conflicting interests and possible prejudices;
- don't report statements as fact. Use qualifying phrases like "according to Kuritech", or "says Dr X".

These rules (not to mention the one about getting your facts right) are routinely ignored by sections of the British media. Bad science journalism (usually by non-specialists) is depressingly common. And you will often find your carefully expressed nuances and qualifiers obliterated by an over-zealous sub-editor. The mangling has occasionally been so bad that I've wanted to disown the end result.

Getting started

How do you move into medical journalism? The specialist press and its online counterparts are the easiest to break into if you have the right scientific background. Getting





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into consumer magazines is more difficult, and getting a break in broadcasting or the national press is very tough indeed. For an excellent guide to starting a career in science journalism, visit the website of the Association of British Science Writers [1].

A course in journalism may help. Don't waste money on those heavily advertised correspondence courses: they are generally acknowledged to be useless. Read a good journalism textbook instead. Freelancing is a good way in. Study the market to see who is using freelance contributors. You could then ask if they are looking for new writers. Better still, suggest a specific story that you think might interest them – having carefully studied the publication or website first. Some publish guidelines for contributors. If it's a feature idea, give a synopsis. If it's news, say where you heard it and who you plan to interview. For consumer magazines and the national press, the only hope for unpublished writers is probably to send in the entire article on spec, unless you have a very hot piece of news indeed. Never offer something to more than one publication at once.

Freelance journalism is fun, but it's tough to make it pay the bills on its own. While some markets pay well (the best ones matching the average daily rates paid for medical writing), most do not. Many have held their word rates static for the last 10 years or so. The scientific and medical press generally pay better than the general and consumer media, unless you can make it into the colour supplements. A first staff job in the media will almost certainly pay less than medical writing.

Editors want evidence of writing ability, and a background in medical writing provides that. Your close links with the pharmaceutical industry could be seen as positive – giving you an inside view; or as negative – too uncritical and unable to see things from a non-pharma perspective. Many medical journalists are suspicious of the industry, particularly of its PR activities. However, it is possible to combine medical writing and journalism, providing you are seen to understand the different requirements of each discipline.

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References

1. So you want to be a science writer? Association of British Science Writers, www.absw.org.uk

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

"No mistake is more common and more fatuous than appealing to logic in cases which are beyond her jurisdiction."

Samuel Butler, writer (1835-1902)

