

## **The Write Stuff**



### **My return to medical writing**

by Clair Firth

When I was asked to write something for TWS, I was surprised to say the least. My next thought was, what on Earth can I write about? Having only been a medical writer for a couple of years and having fallen into this profession by living abroad and not being able to find work in my chosen field, I thought I was the last person who would be able to contribute to the journal. But then again, many (most?) of us have come to this area by accident, very few of us follow an exact career plan with the aim of being a medical writer.

Anyway, back to my conundrum of what to write. I'm sure we could all write about the daily problems medical writers face, so I've decided to write about what happens when you're out of the office for a while. I have just returned to work after an 18-month absence. I am lucky enough to live in Central Europe where maternity leave of up to two years is the norm. Although I have kept in touch with my colleagues, I severely underestimated the changes that have arisen in my absence. Not only has my 3.1-kg baby girl grown to a huge 14-kg toddler, and not only have I managed to complete my MSc (after a long 5-year slog on a distance learning programme), but my office environment and working day has changed completely.

First of all, there were three medical writers (myself included) based in our European office before I left work; now there are four full-time and two part-time medical writers in Europe and four full-time writers and one editor in the USA. When I first came back to work, I had worked with just one of the medical writers prior to maternity leave, and she was in the process of leaving the company. So I was left working with three medical writers in our office with whom I had never previously collaborated – not an easy prospect. The first few weeks were therefore quite frustrating, e.g. I had people explaining studies to me for which I had written the CSR. Of course, all the study numbers were new and, as our department had quite dramatically increased its scope, we were now writing reports on all kinds of therapeutic products, rather than just vaccines as it had been before. On a more negative note, for some apparently unknown reason, we now use a CSR template with the dreaded "1. TITLE PAGE" printed above the actual study title because we have to follow the 'guideline' ICH-E3 to the letter.

Another big shock was that the CTD is now a real document, rather than just the subject of numerous courses and training sessions. I lost count of the number of courses I was sent me on in 2002, but now the CTD was being written by my new colleagues and I had no idea where to begin. Unsurprisingly it seems that the aim of the CTD to be fully acceptable internationally has not quite paid off, given that our American colleagues write one version for the FDA and my office another version for European submissions, but that was to be expected (at least it was always inferred at the courses I attended).

I am now working part-time, just 14 hours a week, and this has also limited my ability to work on specific projects. To be home relatively early, I start work at 8 am. Most of my

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colleagues come in after 9.30 am as they are likely to be here until late if working with the American office. Obviously it is not easy for me to be involved in teleconferences, which start at 6 pm, so it is hard for me to always be "out of the loop" (as the Americans would say). However, the short hours allow me to help my colleagues with a variety of projects rather than being solely responsible for an individual report and working on it for weeks. I am enjoying the variety of new documents and therapeutic areas, especially after two years of working on relatively monotonous vaccine studies, which was my only medical writing experience prior to maternity leave.

In spite of all these challenges, I am glad to be back in a scientific (and adult) environment, although I do still enjoy the finger-painting and Play-doh of my office-free days!

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### **Announcement and Call for Participation Mediterranean Editors' and Translators' Meeting 2005**

**Interdisciplinary Collaboration  
—International Communication**

**4-5 November 2005, Barcelona, Spain**

Mediterranean Editors' and Translators' Meetings (METM) is a new southern European and Mediterranean network of English language consultants of many types—editors, translators/interpreters, communication coaches, technical writers and educators in English for specific purposes. The association will be launched at the group's first meeting in Barcelona on 4-5 November 2005 at the start of Science Week.

METM aims to provide a meeting place for consultants who work with oral, written and multimedia texts—and with their authors—in areas where English language mediators are needed. The plan is to share expertise and channel information between local language consultants and larger organizations like the European Association of Science Editors, the Council of Science Editors, the European (and American) Medical Writers' Association(s) and the IEEE Professional Communication Society. While the main focus will be on editing, translation, coaching and other communication services for academics and professionals in scientific disciplines, the needs of other groups in finance, culture, politics, business and non-governmental organizations will also fall within our scope.

The first meeting—METM 05—will feature two plenary speakers. Joy Burrough-Boenisch, founding member of SENSE, a model self-help organization of English editors in the Netherlands, will speak on the "sense" of editors' associations. She will also give a workshop on how to train editors and translators to work with the texts of non-native English speakers. The second speaker is Ana Marusic, former president of the World Association of Medical Editors and editor-in-chief of the *Croatian Medical Journal*. In that capacity Dr. Marusic has been instrumental in implementing an approach to peer review that also serves to mentor young scientists, helping to create a critical mass of publishing researchers in her region.

**The Journal of the European Medical Writers Association**