

An AMWA¹ member reports on an EMWA conference

By Jack Aslanian

By most criteria applicable to such events the 15th annual conference of EMWA, held in Lyon, France, May 2 - 6, 2006, was very satisfying: a record attendance, a serious, varied, and engaging educational program, ample networking, an inviting locale, memorable food, and at least for this writer, the wish to make it to the next one—which will be held in Vienna, Austria.

I attended, for general education, most of the open sessions on electronic submissions and other national or international regulatory topics, and came away from them exposed to a plethora of acronyms and jargon and with the sense that those areas are experiencing change and tweaking of systems, uncertainties, and attempts to instill coordination and reconciliation between various levels of data and document generation and use—including coordination between European nations and compliance with both national and European Community laws and FDA expectations. It should go without saying that most, but not all, of this pertains to the regulatory domain. Any resentments and concerns medical writers and editors may have about digital documentation and submission and their mandated formats probably are rooted in the facts that (1) this a new way of doing things, requiring some learning and habituation, (2) the various interested and guidelines- and format-imposing agencies are not yet fully coordinated between themselves, and (3) the new guidelines and the deadlines to conform to them are imposed on medical writers from outside by authorities (administrators and gatekeepers), most of whom are neither practicing medical scientists nor medical writers.

Medical writers must be a very friendly and mutually supportive lot. The same camaraderie, enthusiasm, inquisitiveness, and eagerness to learn notable at AMWA meetings were present and equally intense in Lyon. On the train after the conference had ended, I wondered about the reasons for these shared organizational traits. It cannot be that certain types are attracted to medical writing. The way an organization is started and by whom could, however, account for the personality of the organization. Shared traits bring the founders of an organization together; these traits then help motivate new members to join and emulate them. Another explanation for the collegial personality of medical writers that is worth thinking about is the view that medical writ-

ing is a service and advocacy industry, with a high level of expertise and thoughtfulness required. There are, of courses, true authors among us, independent, creative, original. Most of us, however, labor within the constraints imposed by common goals: precision and correctness of language; communication of truthful information; the awareness that the information to which our communicative skills are applied, though at times seemingly of minimal or transitory values, is ultimately a matter of life and death. We also have masters, the true originators of the information we process, and formats to abide by. It is possible that the awareness, maybe only subconscious, of being 'servants' of a common cause results in the emergence of a sense of fellowship and the ways of comportment and relating to each other that EMWA and AMWA members manifest. Whatever the underlying reason(s), these organizations are the stronger and more appealing for the shared collegial personalities of their members.

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A new threat to freedom: Internet censorship

Can you imagine that one day you might be sitting at your desk and the police march in and arrest you. You then spend 10 years in prison. It happens. But what might you have done? Sent an email to a friend expressing a political opinion your government did not like? Amnesty International has launched a campaign to fight for Internet freedom. The Internet "is the new frontier in the battle between those who want to speak out, and those who want to stop them. We must not allow it to be suppressed." Amnesty International is asking for support for the representations they will be making to the United Nations when it meets in November to discuss the future of the Internet.

See: <http://irrepressible.info>

¹ AMWA = American Medical Writers Association