

Conference highlight reports for marketing purposes: A cross between medical writing and journalism

by Anita van den Oetelaar and H el ene van Moorsel

Further to the article by Catherine Mary in this issue of *TWS*, we would like to report on another cross between medical writing and journalism. As an in-house (Anita) and a freelance (H el ene) medical writer for a communications agency, we are involved in the writing and editing of conference highlight reports which are used to communicate the latest results from company-sponsored trials as presented at national and international medical congresses. In practice, this means that we mainly report from industry-sponsored symposia and related poster and abstract presentations. Our highlights mostly address post-marketing research and other drug-related information, but there has also been an increasing demand for covering news on other topics related to the therapeutic area of interest, such as genetic research, pathophysiology research, diagnosis and assessment, or non-pharmacological interventions. Pharmaceutical companies use our conference highlights for mailings to their target groups of specialists, as handout material to be distributed by their sales representatives, or as stand material at exhibitions. Most of our reports are distributed worldwide; translations in a variety of languages are therefore not an exception.

To be involved in ‘our kind’ of writing, you have to like travelling. We report from medical meetings around the world, and personal attendance at the meeting to be on top of the data is a must. We fully agree with Catherine that covering a congress is intense and programmes, especially those of meetings in the United States, can be loaded. To find our way around, we scan a congress programme in detail before we leave, and if needed, consult our sponsor for a detailed briefing prior to or at the meeting. Abstracts and symposia details are often available on the internet in advance of a congress and provide at least some insight into what to expect and to prepare for, and how much time the writing-up will take.

Whenever allowed, we use audio or video recordings to collect the information in order to reduce the risks incurred with note-taking. Video recordings or access to slides will also help in smoothing the review process once the draft version is finalised. In addition, we collect any other material that might serve as input to the report, such as poster handouts, press releases, articles and monographs. All our reports are reviewed by a colleague writer or editor before being sent off to the sponsor for comments and/or approval. This colleague is responsible for a careful re-check of facts and figures against the original source materials, such as abstracts, posters, slides or research articles.

In our view, a good conference highlight report is defined as one that conveys the sponsor’s key message clearly and concisely by way of new and exciting data. The informa-

tion should be complete, consistent, accurate and referenced, and provide a level of detail and transparency that allows the reader to assess the content critically and in perspective. The report should be written in a way that interests the clinician but at the same time meets the marketing standards of the sponsor and the formatting requirements of the publisher. This, together with structuring the data as gathered at the congress, can put a great demand on the writer’s creativity. The vast majority of our reports cover only those clinical trials that are funded by the sponsoring company, but occasionally we are asked to include studies from other pharmaceutical companies as well. This raises the question of balance. Although there may be some pressure to leave out data from studies with less favourable results, it would always be our advice to clients to review all relevant data as presented at the meeting. This balanced approach adds to the credibility of the report, and hence to the value of its general message.

Over the few past years, we have been experiencing a shift from heavy promotional, one- or two-page newsletters to more in-depth, educational summary reports. Today, our reports are between 2,000 and 4,000 words and include 4-6 key figures or tables. Their style is narrative, and we try to include at least some quotes from opinion leaders in which they put the information in perspective. In the organisation we both work for, this change away from a newsletter format to more educational reports initially led to a debate whether writers should have a background in journalism with an interest in medicine (as they used to have until that time), or whether it would be best to start working with writers with a science degree with an interest in journalism. At the end of the day, it was concluded that both types of writers are needed to be able to produce newsworthy as well as in-depth and scientifically sound reports. For example, the work of ‘true’ journalists is greatly appreciated when sponsors request a report with coverage of breaking news from studies with high media exposure. Writers with a science background (like ourselves) are mostly deployed when topics drift away from the clinical arena and become more theoretical. It needs no further explanation that regardless of a writer’s background, a prerequisite is the capacity for accurate and responsible reporting in a way that is appealing to a medical specialist audience.

What specific skills do you need to write congress reports for marketing purposes? The core writing and analytical skills are no different from those required for other types of medical writing. However, your style must be more journalistic and narrative. For those who would like to read more about medical journalism, we recommend the article

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by Jo Whelan about journalism and science writing published in *TWS* [1]. To be involved in congress reporting you also need to be flexible and practical. Travelling puts demands on your social or family life and assignments may come at the last minute. Moreover, collecting the information can be quite challenging due to all sorts of practical and technical problems that will call for instant solutions. Your resources may vary at each congress, and audio recorders and cameras have a tendency to break down or run out of batteries at the most inconvenient time. Good social skills are a must to successful networking at a congress, as this is the place to meet current and future clients.

Do we like our jobs? Yes, we do! Over the past few years, we have followed the rapid development of scientific and clinical knowledge in a wide variety of therapeutic areas. Within certain limits, this has enabled us to select and to become more expert in areas of our personal interest. We have also been able to see many parts of the world (although we will not romanticise the travelling part), to meet interesting people from the fields of medicine and science, and to establish valuable relationships with new colleagues.

After reading all this, you may conclude that our way of report writing and that of Catherine Mary are essentially the same. From the 'investigative' perspective, this is certainly true. However, more so than with Catherine's approach, we need to focus on the sponsor's product and marketing strategy, and we constantly find ourselves in the area of tension between pharmaceutical marketing and medical science. Reporting at these crossroads appeals to a writer's ability to bring together two perspectives that by some are thought to be irreconcilable. In our experience it is possible by combining in-depth knowledge, good communication skills and creativity to produce conference highlight reports that are appreciated by all parties involved, marketeers as well as clinicians.

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1. Whelan J. Medical journalism—a career move? *The Write Stuff* 2005;14(2):52-4.

The English-to-American Dictionary

I was not allowed to read Enid Blyton's books as a child because they were not considered literary enough—resulting in my hardly ever reading anything. And this was even before the lady was accused of racism, homoeroticism and sexism. These later accusations led to her books being edited for modern children, who know about these things. Hence, gollywogs have been replaced by white goblins, Noddy no longer shares a bed with Big Ears and Dick and Fanny are now called Rick and Franny. Did Enid Blyton deliberately try to subvert young children by using these terms and scenarios? As a random test I decided to search the Internet to find out when 'fanny' was first used as an indecent word. Yes, I know this was a fairly pointless exercise. I did not find the answer anyway because I became side tracked when I stumbled upon the English-to-American Dictionary¹. This dictionary is compiled by Chris Rae, a Scot, who after spending some time in America, realised that many words used by the Americans have different or rude means in common British usage and vice versa. With his dictionary he sets out to explain the meaning of common British slang words to enlighten naïve intercontinental travellers and also save them from embarrassment. He points out where different words are used for the same thing or the same words have different meanings on either side of the Atlantic. Some examples are given below. The button 'Links' also lists some interesting slang as well as British versus American English resources.

filth *n.* I ought to mention at this juncture that just because words are in this fine tome doesn't mean to say that I use them regularly. That said... *filth* is used in the UK as a slightly-less-than-complimentary moniker for our fine police force.

flog *v.* As well as the normal meaning of this (to beat viciously), in the UK this is a slang term for selling something—a bloke in the pub might *flog* you a dodgy car stereo, but you're less likely to find Marks and Spencer announcing in the press that from next week they'll be flogging a whole new ladies wear range. Americans might use "hawk" instead.

frog *n.* I suspect that including racist terms in here is going to start me getting a barrage of abuse. To Brits, I'm afraid to say, 'frogs' are French people. Of course, they are also little slimy green amphibians. Frogs, I mean, not French people.

one *n.* This is a rather antiquated British way of saying 'I'. You'd more likely hear your grandmother say "in my day, one didn't spit in the street" than your local crack dealer say "since Dave the train got knocked off, one's had to raise one's prices".

peckish *adj.* A person described as *peckish* is a little hungry. Only a little hungry, mind, not ravenous—you wouldn't hear people on the news talking about refugees who'd tramped across mountains for two weeks and were as a result a little peckish.

wonky *adj.* Possibly best described as a light-hearted way of saying 'not quite right'. You might say "My plans for the evening went a bit wonky"; you would not say "I'm sorry to tell you, Mr. Jones, but your wife's cardiac operation has gone a bit wonky".

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1. <http://english2american.com/dictionary/f.html>