



Who wants to be a medical writer?

BRIAN C SHANLEY

Tell someone you are a writer and they will assume you are a novelist; tell them you are a medical writer and they will probably jump to the conclusion that you write novels with a medical theme like those by Robin Cook or Tess Gerritsen. On the contrary, medical writing is a branch of non-fiction whereby writers communicate and explain medical information either to health professionals or the general public.

There are many categories of medical writing corresponding to the varied interests of clients and employers. These include government agencies, hospitals, news media, journals, pharmaceutical firms, publishers, research organisations and universities. Their overall aim is to improve the health of individuals and populations.

At one time, news media assigned the reporting of medical and health matters to junior staff writers who often had difficulty in understanding the subject matter. Nowadays, medical writers are highly trained and skilled at their work. The Australian public is frequently informed of important developments in the medical field; *The Health Report*, presented by Norman Swan on ABC's Radio National, is a good example. There is also extensive coverage of medical matters in journals, magazines and websites by medical writers.

The biggest employer of medical writers worldwide is the pharmaceutical industry. In Australia all prescription drugs must be approved for safety and efficacy by the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee (PBAC) before inclusion in the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) and sale to the public. Pharmaceutical firms have to present extensive data to substantiate their claims. This information is prepared by specialist medical writers, also known as regulatory and clinical scientists, who have their own professional association (ARCS). Other medical writers working for pharmaceutical firms are concerned with marketing the company's products to health professionals.

Medical writers also play an important part in educating doctors and other health professionals and by contributing to the continuing medical education (CME) programs which all doctors must follow to keep up to date. These CME programs use written, audio and graphic material including articles, case discussions, photographs, videos and question banks. Educational material for patients in the form of brochures about medications and diseases are also produced by medical writers.

Writing about health and medical issues has long been popular among consumers. The current trend is for information on health-related websites catering for niche interests, such as breast cancer (www.breastcancer.org) and prostate cancer (www.prostate.org.au).

For people considering a career as a medical writer there are important questions to consider. First: is a medical degree necessary? Many medical writers have a degree in the biological or health sciences, including medicine. This is an advantage but not essential. A majority of medical writers have a background in the humanities. All medical writers require knowledge and skills in medicine and writing. Those who begin with a background in the health sciences need to acquire training in writing, while those who start out well qualified in communication need to undergo some form of training in health science to do the job well. For further guidance, contact the Australasian Medical Writers Association (AMWA), which runs a professional development program and can advise about courses available in Australia.

The second question is whether to seek employment or to take the freelance path. In general, it is desirable to gain experience and contacts through employment in the type of organisations already mentioned or in a dedicated medical writing agency. Those who already have experience and established contacts may decide to branch out as a freelancer, offering their services on a project basis to potential employers. AMWA maintains a list of members who work as freelancers. Potential employers can make enquiries free of charge.

Thirdly, how does one make a start as a medical writer? Prospective medical writers must be adequately trained, both in medicine/health and in writing. While it is neither necessary nor practical to be an expert in all things medical, it is essential to be able to write clearly and concisely. It is advisable to join AMWA early on and to consult other members for advice about professional development.

Medical writers require a range of resources and the AMWA lists useful resources on its website. By attending AMWA conferences, workshops and other functions, beginners will be able to increase their circle of contacts, which is essential for success, especially as a freelancer. These days all writers should consider setting up a website to advertise their expertise. Check out the websites of other medical writers for ideas about presentation and useful content. Beginners who follow these directions should be well on their way to becoming established medical writers. Then, all they need is persistence. ■

Further information

The Health Report www.abc.net.au/rn/healthreport/

ARCS www.arcs.com.au

AMWA www.medicalwriters.org

Brian Shanley is a medical writer with a special interest in education. He writes for the general and medical press and is also working on a book about the scientific basis of health and disease. From 1980 to 1994 he was Professor of Medical Biochemistry, University of Queensland.