

## **Medical writing in the Old World**

by Barry Drees

In Europe, where most professions are represented by ancient guilds and trace their origins to the Roman empire or the middle ages, people usually react with puzzlement when I tell them that I am a medical writer. Although there has been what amounts to medical writing here for a long time, it is a relatively new concept as a specialized profession, as reflected in the fact that the European Medical Writers Association (EMWA) was founded only in 1991 (from an impromptu meeting of European members of the American Medical Writers Association [AMWA]) whereas AMWA will soon be celebrating its 60<sup>th</sup> year. Medical writing got off to a somewhat slower start here in the Old World partly due to a more deeply entrenched tradition of authority in Europe, whereby only acknowledged experts are seen as capable of communicating about a subject, and partly due to a culture that is less oriented to media and advertising than in the USA.

People who refer to themselves as medical writers in Europe tend to work for the pharmaceutical industry (as, for example, the majority of the EMWA membership). The other kinds of medical writers found in North America and Australia usually go by other names with their own organisations (the European Association of Science Editors, for example, which the medical journal editors call home). Because medical writing is such a new profession, there are no specific degrees or paths of study one can follow to become a medical writer. Rather, medical writers in Europe tend to be former life science researchers, editors, or come from other jobs within the pharmaceutical industry. They therefore have an extremely high level of education and tend to have a significant input concerning scientific content in addition to the more traditional editing tasks such as style, grammar or spelling.

The job of medical writing in the pharmaceutical industry is multifaceted. One of the exciting things about this kind of writing is the very wide range of readers we need to write for, including scientists (publications), doctors and nurses (trial protocols), patients (patient information sheets), and national drug regulators (submission documentation). This requires great flexibility as a writer. Furthermore, although good interpersonal skills are required in any author-editor relationship, the medical writer working on a pharmaceutical industry project will often have to coordinate contributions from several different groups (statisticians, clinicians, investigators, regulatory specialists, patients, etc.) while delicately balancing the needs of the various egos involved. In the process, we also tend to develop project management skills, keeping the various contributors happy and the projects on schedule.

One of the most distinguishing characteristics of Europe is the lack of a common language. Medical writers from areas with only a single language (North America or Australia) often express surprise when I tell them that although I work in Germany, most of my writing is in English, the language used for multinational drug registrations in Europe. Thus, it is hardly surprising that three-quarters of the EMWA membership are native English speakers, many working in a foreign language environment. This can be used to the advantage of the medical writer when dealing with authors. I know

from personal experience, as well as the AMWA workshop "The author-editor relationship", that medical writers still have difficulties being accepted by much of the scientific and medical establishments, especially in English-speaking countries. In continental Europe, however, we can always get an initial foot in the door via the chance to "just check the English". Thereafter, we can cure all the other common ills (inconsistency, incompleteness, poor presentation, etc.) and convince our clients of the value of our contribution. This also means that one-quarter of EMWAs membership has English as only a second or even third language. Addressing the issues and concerns of these members, and making EMWA an organisation that truly represents us all is a challenge EMWA is only beginning to face.

What lies ahead? One can hardly watch television or open a magazine today without seeing something about the information revolution. At the same time, everyone seems to bemoan the growing gap between scientists and the general public. Technical writers, such as ourselves, are in the exciting position of playing an influential role in both of these discussions and, thus, I foresee a secure and dynamic future for the profession, especially in a multi-lingual region such as Europe.