

MEMBER MUSINGS

Finding Significance in a Career Full of Trials

By Jen LiMarzi

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I began college in the mid-1990s majoring in molecular genetics with the intention of becoming a modern female Mendel, albeit with cuter clothes, who would ultimately cure a myriad of diseases and discover an affordable way to clone the family dog. Two years into my pursuits, I found myself turning my plastic organic chemistry models into bracelets and hair accessories more often than complex compounds and molecules. The idea of a life and career filled with scientific benchwork that might never lead to a concrete answer or discovery was something I could no longer fathom.

As you can imagine, the call telling my parents that their future Nobel-prize-winning geneticist daughter was now an English major was a tense one.

“I suppose you could be a medical writer,” my mother reasoned.

I rolled my eyes while on the phone feeling certain that she didn’t comprehend my personal evolution and new goals. I now intended to be a modern Jane Austen, albeit with cuter clothes, who would write the Great American novel and be a pioneer of the writing community.

When I graduated from college, I soon learned that there were very few job postings that came with the title “Aspiring Novelist.” Instead, I went into textbook publishing, where I learned the finer points of photocopying, office politics, putting together a business casual wardrobe, and commuting—given that my meager salary left my childhood bedroom as my only housing option. Hoping that my life and career weren’t over at 23, I sought out the help of a recruiter who landed me an interview at a relatively new Internet company called Medscape.

It was the late 1990s, and if you were fortunate enough to ride the high of the Internet boom, it’s an experience you will not likely forget, and one that I often wish could be re-created. My new salary meant a move into New York City, and my new work environment introduced me to some of the smartest and most interesting coworkers I’ve ever known. More importantly, my new position allowed me to write. Well, at least a little bit. I worked in the Public Relations department at a time when every day seemed to inspire something press release worthy.

After a few years, the Internet boom began its epic spiral downward. With mergers, takeovers, and layoffs looming, I jumped at an offer to be an account executive at a midtown public relations firm fearing that if I didn’t jump, I might be pushed off the plank. While there, I became an expert press release writer, but our firm soon became hard pressed to

find clients. Half the firm was laid off within a year and I spent a summer unemployed and wondering if perhaps I should have taken my organic chemistry models a bit more seriously.

After countless interviews, I finally scored one at a very small ophthalmology magazine that was intrigued by my experience at Medscape. I put on my best interview suit and was about to head downtown to the company’s office located two blocks from the World Trade Center, when my phone rang.

“There seems to be something crazy going on here,” the company’s production manager said. “Perhaps we ought to reschedule for next week?”

My interview was scheduled for September 11, 2001. Despite the tragedy and catastrophe that was downtown Manhattan, 2 weeks later I started as an associate editor at an ophthalmology journal. I was fairly certain that I got the job because I was the only candidate who showed up. As a resilient New Yorker, the challenge of the job quickly shifted from a physical one where I had to wear a dust mask just to make it through the day to a mental one where I had to learn to really write. My boss was an excellent mentor who afforded me lots of opportunities as well as comic relief during tough times.

Unfortunately, the economy again plummeted and with it went the amount of advertising dollars that the magazine was pulling in. Once again laid off, I was now a bit older and wiser and knew that a job hunt would be a challenge. Still clinging to the idea that I was far too creative to be a medical writer, I interviewed at popular magazines, advertising agencies, and any quirky place that would call me back.

One such quirky place was a fairly new medical education company looking for a medical writer. I left the interview confused about what medical education was or what the job would entail. Assuming this confusion shone through on the interview, I was not confident anything would come of it. However, several days later the entire Northeast suffered a massive blackout. When the lights came back on I was notified that the job was mine, though I was again convinced that it was because I was the only candidate who showed up.

For the second time in a row, I had unintentionally become a medical writer. Attempting to get my feet wet in medical education was akin to being baptized by a fire hose. In those early months, I learned about the pharmaceutical regulatory process, annotating, advisory boards, key opin-

ion leaders, and reprint carriers and became more adept at PowerPoint and Internet research than any human really should be. Much like my days at Medscape, my coworkers at my new company were on the ground floor of a burgeoning industry and with that came an energy and strong sense of comradery.

With the growth of medical education came a slew of competitors all chasing after the same piece of the pharmaceutical marketing money pie. Tired of working on tiny projects and fearing that another layoff may be eminent, I returned one of the recruiter calls that had found its way into my voice mail.

My next position was as a senior medical writer at a larger medical education firm with solid clients and out-of-the-box ideas. We created a medical Jeopardy-style program for residents, wrote review articles for physicians, created speaker slide decks for pharmaceutical giants, and had advisory board meetings in every corner of the country and world. Work was intense but highly varied, and I was consistently figuring out how to create something new with every project we proposed and won.

Several years in, now serving as associate scientific director, the pace was burning me out and the diversity of duties had me looking for structure and a little life balance. This is what inspired my last career move and led me to where I am today.

I went into my interview for PeerDirect stating that I wanted to solely be a medical writer, albeit in cuter clothes. Finally confessing that I was a medical writer was, in a sense, similar to an alcoholic admitting their secret at an AA meeting. Everybody apparently knew what I was and needed to be except me. My experiences landed me a job that would both allow me to write and work from home, giving me that work-life balance that I craved.

A week after I started my new job, a steam pipe exploded outside the building where I had last worked. I took this as a sign from the employment gods that I no longer was gaining employment as a result of disasters but should simply be thankful that I had avoided them.

Lately, the medical education, regulatory, and pharmaceutical landscapes are shifting so that medical writers are getting far fewer freedoms in creating interesting and engaging content. More often than not, after completing feats of strength to submit a piece into a client's complicated review system, we're simply told to repurpose pieces that are safe and approved, taking language verbatim from something that may make little sense. While I'll admit that this is discouraging to me in my current role as a medical writer, I know that I and my colleagues have survived worse—layoffs, explosions, implosions, and disasters both physical and perceived.

I have faith that we'll survive these latest challenges and if you're still a medical writer when the next incarnation of the industry emerges, it's likely no accident.

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The Global Alliance of Publication Professionals (GAPP) has made its debut with the launch of its Web site (www.gappteam.org). The GAPP team is led by Karen Woolley, PhD, CMPP, AMWA's 2009 Keynote Speaker, and includes three additional AMWA members: Art Gertel; Cindy Hamilton, PharmD, ELS; and Gene Snyder, MBA, as well as Dr Adam Jacobs, a leader in the European Medical Writers Association (EMWA). Each of these GAPP members has demonstrated a strong commitment to ethical publication practices, conducting original research, and providing expert commentary on the ethics and value of medical publication professionals.

GAPP recognizes the difficulty journalists have in gaining timely, international, and credible responses to breaking news stories about medical publication issues, such as ghostwriting. GAPP aims to bridge the gap between journalists and medical publication professionals by helping journalists and their readers understand the difference between ghostwriters and medical publication professionals (eg, professional medical writers, publication planners).

GAPP members look forward to developing respectful relationships with journalists. The public has the right to hear the voice of medical publication professionals and make its own judgments about the ethics and value of these professionals.

"We need to reach out to journalists around the world and provide them with the information they need to prepare well-informed and balanced articles about medical publication professionals. We have been confused with ghostwriters for far too long and, frankly, we have to take some of the blame for that," says Professor Woolley.

Failure to publish, particularly public-funded research, is unethical, yet according to a recent analysis, less than half of NIH-funded research is published within 30 months.¹ "Professional medical writers help busy or inexperienced authors prepare high-quality manuscripts in a timely manner. We help authors meet their ethical and scientific obligations to share results in the peer-reviewed literature," says Dr Hamilton. Gertel points out another advantage of medical writers: "Evidence indicates manuscripts with medical writing assistance show higher compliance with publication guidelines and are less likely to be retracted for misconduct."

GAPP is designed to complement, not compete with, AMWA and other professional associations, such as EMWA and the International Society for Medical Publication Professionals (ISMPP). The GAPP Web site offers links to the Web sites, mission statements, and code of ethics for AMWA, EMWA, ISMPP, and other associations "committed to high levels of transparency, integrity, and professionalism."

➤ For more information, visit the GAPP Web site (www.gappteam.org) or contact GAPP members at contact@gappteam.org.

References

1. Ross JS, Tse T, Zarin DA, Xu H, Zhou L, Drumholz HM. Publication of NIH funded trials registered in ClinicalTrials.gov: cross sectional analysis. *BMJ*. 2012;344:d7292