

Only Doctors Understand Medical Journals!

Real Life Experiences in Medical Writing

By Bernard Delacruz, Ph.D., Bachem Americas, Inc., Torrance, CA

On September 8, 2012, Lanie Adamson--long time member and past President of the Southwest Pacific chapter of the AMWA--delighted the audience in a talk entitled "Real Life Experiences in Medical Writing." She regaled the members about her 40 years as a medical writer including how AMWA helped her make the transition from being a childbirth coach to head of medical writing for a global healthcare company. She also touched on her experiences recovering from a stroke and managing Parkinson's disease.

Preparing to Speak with Parkinson's Disease

When Lanie was initially asked to address the Southwest Pacific chapter, her mouth said "yes!" before her brain could say "no!" She then scolded herself, "How do you expect to speak for an hour? You have Parkinson's disease!" Lanie said she was inspired when she saw Michael J. Fox, an actor with Parkinson's disease, on an episode of the TV show *The Good Wife*. "If he can fight [Parkinson's disease] for 30 years, I can do it!" She then immersed herself in extensive physical and speech therapy including making silly faces as part of her facial muscle exercises.

Lanie then put herself to the test by giving a radio interview on public speaking. Initially, Lanie thought she had done badly; however, after listening to a recording, she realized she had done okay. "It was the adrenaline that got me through," Lanie said. She also credits being a member of Toastmasters with helping her prepare. She practiced her talk at her club and received valuable feedback on how to improve it. "Then I knew I was ready for today's talk," said Lanie.

Life in AMWA

Lanie started to make the transition to medical writer back in 1971, when she wrote a book on childbirth education, childbirth coaching and baby care. Her complete transition was in the mid-1980s when she was in her master's degree internship as Administrative Planner at a newly-built Women's Hospital. She got to know several OB/GYNs. When she first approached one of the doctors about medical writing, he retorted "No one but a medical doctor could

possibly understand how to write or edit medical journal articles.”

Lanie proved the doctors wrong. She asked a doctor if she could edit a rejected manuscript. She fixed the grammar and even caught a math error. The doctor submitted the article and it was published. This led to additional collaborations and ultimately editing a book on fetal monitoring.

Lanie then told the chapter about her first experience with AMWA. She was living in Orange County and learned about a chapter meeting being held in Los Angeles. She didn't know anyone at the meeting and was nervous. When she arrived at the meeting, she almost got back in her car to go home. However, she overcame her fear and went into the meeting.

"They greeted me so warmly and kindly," said Lanie as she realized she was among kindred spirits. She acknowledged in particular Michele Vivitrito, Elizabeth Stone, and Jerry McKee for making her feel welcome. Lanie discovered that medical writing was the best-kept secret career and that she had spent her whole life preparing for it. "The meeting changed my life!" exclaimed Lanie.

Attending her first Asilomar conference was also a transformative experience. Lanie was excited to get to meet newsmakers and to listen to many inspiring speakers. She said that the classes she took through AMWA were among the best. She went on to describe walking around Asilomar and listening to the crash of the ocean as deer wandered among the trees. While stumping on the beach looking for bioluminescence, she told Jerry McKee how wonderful it was being at the Asilomar conference. He then gently convinced her (She laughs that he "conned" her) into being the Conference Director the following year. This was Lanie's entry into the circle of the Conference Organizing Committee and participating in the Asilomar traditions. On the last day, the committee puts on a humorous skit. One year she donned a blond wig and mini-skirt to play Tina Turner.

Writing for the Future

Lanie went onto describe the role of medical writers as translating abstract medical concepts into language the audience can understand. "We are storytellers," she said. Medical writers understand there are many different audiences. Medical writers are also quality control between the clinical data and the written reports and must make sure conclusions are supported by the data.

She went on to address the controversy over use of medical writers by pharmaceutical

companies. In 2007, lawyers suing Merck over Vioxx raised questions over authorship of the manuscripts submitted for publication and suggested that the writers were bought and paid for. The situation was made worse by a JAMA editorial suggesting any research from industry is "tainted." In May 2008, Lanie was lead author in a letter to Nature Biotechnology called "Ghostbusters should only bust ghosts." The letter cut through the fear and confusion and laid out the critical roles that medical writers play and ethical standards that guide them. To quote the letter, "Medical writers are skilled communications professionals who help the diverse individuals involved in biomedical research to clearly communicate their discoveries. The medical writer plays a vital role in bringing research to publication."

Lanie believes the future remains bright for medical writers. Lanie is excited by scientific advancements and challenges, such as looking again at what has been called "junk DNA" in the human genome. It reminds us to constantly call assumptions into question. In addition, technological advances in areas such as medical visualization will continue to need skilled writers to explain them to new audiences.

Although Lanie has retired as a medical writer, she has not stopped writing. She has worked on three screenplays and is writing a children's book. Lanie ended her talk on a note of hope, "This may be the last time I am able to speak with all of you, but this will not be the last time you will hear from me."

About Lanie Adamson

Lanie Adamson is a retired medical writer with experience in both clinical research and marketing in both pharmaceuticals and medical devices. Before leaving the corporate world, Lanie ran the global scientific communications department for Advanced Medical Optics (now known as Abbott Medical Optics). She is an AMWA Fellow and received the AMWA President's Award in 2008. She has a BS and MS in health care administration. She has been a member of Toastmasters International for 10 years and has achieved Advanced Communicator Bronze. Lanie has spoken on medical and health care issues for patients, support groups, health care providers, and fellow writers and speakers.

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