

Have You Got What It Takes to Cover Medical Conferences?

By Jennifer Maybin, MA

FROM THE 2008 FREELANCE WORKSHOP

If you don't mind carting carry-on luggage packed with a few dozen batteries and two or three tape recorders through airport security, have nerves of steel, a personality as flexible as Gumby, and a constitution that needs no sleep, you too might want to add medical conference coverage to your resume. Don't be surprised, though, if after one or two stints, you find yourself saying, "I'm never going to do this again." Yet, there you are, covering yet another conference in another city—or country—the following month.

In a tongue-in-cheek introduction to "Is Medical Conference Coverage for You?," Maria B. Vinall outlined the skills, fortitude, and sheer gumption required of writers who cover medical conferences in a presentation at the AMWA-DVC April 12th Freelance Workshop, in Princeton, NJ.

Ms. Vinall, owner of Medical Communications Depot, Inc, in West Chester, PA, broke conference coverage into two types: journalistic and clinical/scientific. Journalistic coverage, she stated, is less detailed and mostly concerned with the highlights of late-breaking clinical trials. It usually requires no references, is liberally sprinkled with quotes, and is often due the same or next day. A writer in this genre needs to understand what is and is not "News" with a capital "N." These stories are the type you read in Medscape or MedPage Today.

Clinical/scientific coverage, on the other hand, is more detailed, must be referenced, often is a compilation of several presentations from one or more session, and uses limited quotes. These stories focus on clinical applicability—taking what you've heard and putting it in context for practicing physicians. Typical turnaround time is 5 to 10 days after the conference.

Vehicles for medical conference stories are general news outlets (although Ms. Vinall cautions this is not the best venue for the novice), society newspapers, specialty medical tabloids, medical Web sites, pharmaceutical companies, consumer publications, wire services, or conference specialty companies. Stories can be features, selected updates, late-breaking trial stories, news, or coverage of satellite symposia.

Assignments may be pre-assigned by an editor (perhaps 2 to 3 days before the conference), developed on-site with an editor, or created on-the-fly by an astute writer who sniffs out the news. Typical assignments are 6500-8000 words per conference (that's 7 to 10 stories of varying lengths).

Skills needed include interviewing experience, speed, time management, flexibility, news judgment, initiative, an understanding of statistics, accuracy, persistence, note-taking, quick thinking, and stamina. Whew! A typical day may start at 6 am and end at 9:30 pm.

Tools of the trade are a high-quality digital camera that can be used without a flash, a good digital recorder (or two), lots of batteries (yes, several dozen), a battery charger and tester, a laptop, and sneakers (you'll be covering a quarter marathon of conference hallways).

Ms. Vinall warned prospective writers to watch for "scope creep" in fees, which can be paid by project, story, word, or per diem. You'll need to register for conferences as press (this may require an assignment letter from a news organization or media identification). Ask permission to use a presenter's slides and request a presenter's review of your finished piece. Check references, even those listed on slides.

The upsides of working in this field are a chance to travel, access to the most current medical information, networking opportunities, and relatively good pay. The downsides are demanding work schedules, technology failures, last-minute schedule changes, hard-to-decipher presenter accents, and travel hassles. And the sheer "uglies" are ego issues, last-minute cancellations, 12-hour days, and major technology failures. So if you decide to pack your bags, be sure you've got backup recorders, laptops, and lots and lots of batteries. You'll give airport security personnel something to ponder.

For more information about conference reporting, read this blog:
<http://medmeeting.blogspot.com>.

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