

DELAWRITER

The quarterly newsletter of AMWA-DVC

April 2024



Living Your Legacy: An Interview with Joan Affleck, the 2023 Harold B. Swanberg Award Winner - Part 1

by Mia Nagarajan

Joan Affleck, MBA, ELS, recipient of the 2023 Harold B. Swanberg Award from the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA), delivered an inspiring educational session about living your legacy at the 2023 AMWA National Conference in Baltimore, Maryland. Medical writers (and people in general) typically think about stories with beginnings, middles, and ends. However, Joan suggested that when we consider the story of our own career, there is another perspective open to us. "A legacy," Joan explained, "is what you live every day and not what you leave at the end of an entire career." In her presentation, Joan discussed the career journey for medical writers and opportunities to bring long-term goals to fruition. She urged medical writers to: define what you stand for, master what you stand for, and live your purpose every day, even when it's tough. Whether or not we have a fully developed vision for a professional life, it is never too early for medical writers to begin living that legacy.

Joan was an Associate Vice President and Head of Medical Writing at Merck & Co., Inc. from 2015 to 2024. During that time, Joan built a world-class medical writing group: streamlining processes, creating efficiencies, and exploring innovative solutions to reduce document volume and ensure high quality. Previously, Joan had built several medical writing departments from the ground up.

Joan became involved with AMWA in 1995. With time, she used her extensive experience to support AMWA's strategic planning as founding chair of the Executive Council (2018-2021), in developing the AMWA Workforce Training Committee, and most recently implementing the Value of Medical Writing Work Group. In 2020, Joan received the AMWA President's Award, and she has been a member of the board of directors since 2021. She also is a Lang Center Innovation Fellow and regular guest lecturer at Columbia University.

I had the pleasure of interviewing Joan for the *Delawriter*, to discuss her career journey, learnings over the years, and advice for medical writers.



Joan Affleck, MBA, ELS

Mia

You packed in a lot over the years. Let's talk about your education. You have a bachelor's degree in nursing, a master's degree in American literature, and an MBA from Columbia University. You are now working on your doctoral degree in medical and health humanities at Drew University. **Tell us about your doctoral degree.**

Joan

It's research work. It's a combination of the things I love and have studied over the years. I'm aiming to obtain the degree in May 2025, and I'm thinking this will be my last degree, but you never know. I have some languages to learn!

Mia

You were a registered nurse for 10 years. Then you were managing editor of two peer-reviewed journals for 6 years and a medical writing manager for 2 years. **What did you do after 2002?**

Joan

After that, I moved from the publishing field into the pharmaceutical industry, first with the clinical research organization (CRO) Parexel. Which is not an uncommon pathway for medical writers, right? Until we started developing an apprentice program at Merck, that is! I learned regulatory writing at this CRO and enjoyed a variety of experiences. My understanding of the pharmaceutical industry accelerated there.

Then I moved to Sanofi where I had several opportunities to help with merger and acquisition work and start new satellite groups. For example, when Sanofi acquired Aventis, Sanofi needed someone to relocate from the Pennsylvania location to the offices of Sanofi-Aventis in New Jersey, to start a medical writing group. I had the family structure and flexibility to do that, so I volunteered. I built a wonderful team of medical writers there.

Every corporate culture is different. An important lesson when you're becoming a manager and leader of medical writing or clinical documentation teams is to understand the company culture. You will need to adapt to the culture; do not expect the culture to adapt to you. At the CEO level, you might see a company culture alter slightly. But, for example, with the change from Ken Frazier to Rob Davis at Merck, Merck is still Merck. It's still a science-driven company regardless of who the CEO is. Remember to adapt your working model to the culture.

Continuing with my time at Sanofi-Aventis, I was available to take on more and more responsibility. I think I had 4 managers before I was appointed head of the department. Many years had passed during which I had my

head down writing - I wasn't aiming to run a department. A colleague of mine likes to talk about the difference between career growth and professional growth. The career growth part is the role, but professional growth is more expansive. Professional growth is about adding to your skills, evolving your philosophy, knowing your inclinations toward specific types of work.

Sanofi acquired Genzyme, a biotech company in Cambridge, MA, focused on rare disease. Genzyme had an interesting portfolio, and that's where I met Andy Lee, head of operations for Genzyme and later my manager at Merck. I also worked with some great medical writers at Genzyme and helped facilitate the integration with Sanofi.

Mia

Did you relocate for each of these jobs?

Joan

Not for all. For the Sanofi-Genzyme collaboration, we had established a headquarters in New Jersey. I was based there, but I traveled frequently to Cambridge. Not everyone can travel as much as I did. One of my important messages to medical writers is to be realistic about what you can do at certain life stages, and be patient, because opportunities come. You never know when they're going to come. Maybe you've just had a baby or your kids are entering high school. There are any number of reasons why relocation, extra responsibility, or heavy workloads may not be right for you. Let the opportunity go, because you can learn so much every single day in your work. I like to imagine that we're all building our toolkit, filling our backpack every day. There's always something else that can be done. Ask yourself: do I have the super-performant Swiss army knife that has all the little tools and gadgets in it? You want to collect those things that will be useful to you. Sometimes it's as simple as experience with document types or therapeutic areas. Or working on an acquisition, or doing a presentation for AMWA, or writing a journal article. Keep collecting those experiences, and do good work. You don't have to worry about it. It will play itself out.

Genzyme was a great experience because I had been working in big pharma with mostly small-molecule products. Expectations were very different in a biotech organization, requiring flexibility and the wearing of many different hats. In biotech, staffs are smaller. You had to just jump in and do whatever was needed. Sanofi had a clear, well-defined hierarchy. It worked perfectly for that organization, but there wasn't that same kind of agility. I realized how much I liked the Genzyme agility.

In 2014, Andy Lee moved from Sanofi to Merck. A year later, I learned that Merck had decided to start a medical-writing team. They were the last big pharma to not have one. I applied to lead it, and moved over to Merck in 2015.

Mia

It sounds like you were open to seizing opportunities and trying new roles, to keep learning and remain flexible?

Joan

Yes, I'm a lifelong learner. I'm constantly curious and trying to learn something new. That plays out in my academic work and in my professional life. Curiosity is a key attribute of mine, which benefited my career. I'm always building my toolkit!

Mia

What motivated you to jump from nursing as a profession to editing?

Joan

Healthcare professionals like nurses influence individual lives daily. I worked in the hospital setting, and that contact with patients and their families was very rewarding. I started thinking, how can I have broader impact? How can I make more of a difference, touch more lives? In the pharmaceutical industry, we sometimes calculate how many patients the company's product has helped. That became meaningful to me early in my career. I was already interested in global public health. That was the catalyst as I made career choices. Working in medical publishing opened the door to meeting investigators, who suggested going into the pharmaceutical industry. They said, "You understand the clinical medicine and science, but also how to create good communication." I started out being a regulatory medical writer. But today there is so much communication that is outward facing, directed at the patient. Patients may not have a sophisticated level of health literacy, so it is important that medical communicators realize they are serving different audiences, and sometimes simultaneously. In the past, the FDA and EMA were considered the two audiences for regulatory materials and now there are many more. Also, some of the documentation we're submitting to regulatory agencies is disseminated on the Internet. It's somewhat redacted, but it's imperative that as medical communicators we think about how we're crafting those communications to serve multiple masters. There are many different stakeholders in our ecosystem now, such as patient advocacy groups, and new documents such as lay summaries and Diversity Action Plans. It is interesting how medical communication has evolved.

Mia

What other advice would you like to share?

Joan

Medical writers are Renaissance people. They are thinking about the science and the clinical implications of that science. They must be on their game with regulatory changes, quality issues, and Good Clinical Practice. There are many necessary skill sets. How do you stay up-to-date with all the changing regulations, guidelines, and best practices? Medical writers play a role in helping people stay abreast of everything, certainly within their company but even beyond that in terms of professional organizations like AMWA.

Within a company, options to keep everyone informed include a lunch-and-learn format, regularly issued pink sheets, quick-hit emails, or instant messaging. In this way, no one carries the full burden alone. That's part of why we have subject-matter experts, and these ideas are a variation on that theme. Medical communicators need to know the general themes and trends to be shared, as well as how the information affects daily work.

I strongly recommend sharing and collaborating in this work, even if you're solo. Make a community of best practices and join AMWA webinars to develop a broader network. Then, if late-breaking changes come along, you have a couple of leads to ask, "Do you know anything about this?" Always enlarge your pool of knowledgeable people, and offer help when needed. These are good professional practices and signs of professionals who care graciously and generously.

Mia

Were there any challenges you faced that were particularly difficult, and how did you overcome them?

Joan

I did move many times and change states and even country. Over the years I had tremendous opportunity as well as tremendous responsibility to travel. It meant that my family did not have the kind of homestead where everybody grew up in that house and lived in the same neighborhood forever. We had other experiences that were very rich and interesting and formative, but I am aware that was a challenge. That was a sacrifice, and it's something I reflect on.

When navigating your career, think about those choices and, to the extent possible, make them with eyes wide open, because there are sacrifices. Our work is sometimes very demanding, and we are working on a weekend or a holiday. We're up and working at 6:00 AM and we're still working at 8:00 PM. Sometimes that's fine, and on other occasions it's not compatible with life circumstances. It's okay to make that call and say: For right now, this isn't working for me. Other opportunities will come along. Maintain your confidence and remember that you are highly skilled. It can be hard. It can be scary and unsettling. I have a lot of empathy for that.

Mia

What were some of the most satisfying things you have done through the years?

Joan

I've had the good fortune to work on some medical products that have been life-changing for people, and that's wonderful. It's very satisfying to know that you've helped extend people's lives. Also, helping people have a career they can live into has been tremendously satisfying.

Mia

What inspired you to speak about legacies and ask other medical writers to think about their legacy?

Joan

The whole idea is *living* your legacy, that is the kernel. Because when people step away from their career, that's typically when people start to look at what they achieved. But we're missing so much, if our focus is on the past, at the end. We all are living our legacy every single day. You're making choices about how you spend your time, and that ripples out in your personal life, your professional life, and how you interact with people. It's a consciousness shift. So I ask people to live into their legacy during their lives. Don't wait. Make conscious choices about what's important to you, what you're trying to achieve with your activities. You want to have a positive impact on people *now*.

We collectively developed the medical writing team at Merck and facilitated many careers. That's a living legacy because those people are working in the industry. That's a gift to the whole world. Not to mention all the products we help get approved so that patients have access to them. That's also wonderful living work. We all know that life is constantly changing, ebbing and flowing. Dramatic life changes can happen in a second. Therefore, live fully present and conscious so that you are here in the moment.

Mia

I heard from many people after your talk who were touched and inspired to reflect on their day-to-day work. They considered your message to be a call or awakening. They are thinking about their legacy, what they stand for, what's important to them, how they can spend their time more

meaningfully and live into their purpose. We feel encouraged to find ways to give back, pay it forward for the next group of medical writers who haven't necessarily been fortunate in terms of their career opportunities or other life circumstances.

Joan

I'm glad. AMWA chapters are a great way to meet people and help form a collegial community. That's wonderful work.

Note: Part 2 of this article will appear in a subsequent *Delawriter* issue.

Mia Nagarajan, PhD, is a Director of Medical Writing at Merck & Co., Inc. in New Jersey and has 15 years of experience in medical and scientific communications.

CALL FOR VOLUNTEERS



Have fun, meet new people, and contribute to your AMWA chapter!

Volunteers are the driving engine of all AMWA-DVC activities.

- Step up! Share your ideas and a little of your time to help AMWA-DVC continue to provide excellent professional development and networking opportunities.
- No experience is necessary.
- It's a great way to network, make friends, showcase your abilities, and expand your skills.
- Interested? Scroll below for more information, then send us a message via the [Contact](#) page or [email](#) the Co-Chairs of the Member Engagement Committee (listed in the [About](#) page).

***Delawriter* Editorial Team**

The *Delawriter* is published quarterly by the Delaware Valley Chapter of the American Medical Writers Association

Executive Editor: Deborah Anderson, PhD

Managing Editor: Jacqueline M. Mahon, MA

Designer: Tara Rachinsky, PhD

Editorial Consultants: Christine Durst, PhD and Ann Volk, MA

Please direct change of address/information to AMWA Headquarters Staff:

American Medical Writers Association

9841 Washingtonian Blvd, Suite 500-26,

Gaithersburg, MD 20878

(240) 238-0940 (telephone)

(301) 294-9006 (fax)

email: amwa@amwa.org

[Visit our AMWA-DVC website](#)

AMWA-DVC | AMWA National, 9841 Washingtonian Blvd, Suite 500-26,
Gaithersburg, MD 20878

[Unsubscribe membercommunications@amwa-dvc.org](mailto:unsubscribe.membercommunications@amwa-dvc.org)

[Update Profile](#) | [Constant Contact Data Notice](#)

Sent by membercommunications@amwa-dvc.org powered by



Try email marketing for free today!