

The quarterly newsletter of the American Medical Writers Association—Delaware Valley Chapter

UPCOMING MEETING

Optimizing Interview Opportunities: Conducting Physician Interviews with Intelligence and Expedience — June 29

Join us at the next AMWA-DVC meeting, as Keith D’Oria discusses how medical writers and editors can:

- Conduct productive physician interviews in a timely and informative fashion
- Prepare for physician interviews
- Maximize their time and the physicians’ time when developing feature stories
- Troubleshoot when physician interviews lack depth or continuity.

About the Presenter

Keith D’Oria, is the managing editor of *Physician’s Weekly*, an oversized, 4-color news product posted in physician access areas in leading United States hospitals and academic health centers. Celebrating its 22nd year of continuous publication, *Physician’s Weekly* (www.physweekly.com) is the leading hospital-based medical news service. Over 250,000 physicians (both office- and hospital-based) read *Physician’s Weekly* each week.

Mr. D’Oria is also the editor of the Patient Education Center (www.patienteducationcenter.org), a multimedia information service for medical group practices and their patients provided by the Medical Group Management Association (MGMA) and produced by *Physician’s Weekly*. The Patient Education Center is designed to improve physician-patient communications, medication compliance, and patient outcomes while also increasing the patient’s satisfaction, knowledge, and health literacy.

Election of Officers

During the meeting, we will also elect 2005-2006 officers. Scott Metsger will move up to president. We will elect a president-elect and a treasurer. The Nominating Committee has proposed Deborah Early, PhD, as president-elect and Maitland Young, PhD, as treasurer. (Since Debbie is currently secretary and has another year to go on her term, another member will be appointed secretary after the election.)

Thanks to Nominating Committee members Kira Belkin, PhD, Kate Casano, MHS, and Bernice Schacter, PhD.

See Upcoming Meeting on 4.

CALENDAR

- **Wednesday, June 29** — “Optimizing Interview Opportunities: Conducting Physician Interviews with Intelligence and Expedience,” Keith D’Oria, Margaret Kuo’s Restaurant, 175 East Lancaster Avenue, Wayne, Pa.
- **September** — Pa. meeting (Topic, speaker, date, and location to be determined)
- **September 29-October 1** — 65th Annual Conference, Pittsburgh, Pa.
- **October** — N.J. meeting (Topic, speaker, date, and location to be determined)

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Dumbing It Down or Saving Lives? Presenting Reader-Friendly Health Information

By Christina Valente

Janet Ohene-Frempong made the life-saving potential of plain language medical communication (especially for a low health-literacy audience) evident to attendees of AMWA-DVC's March 23 dinner meeting. Ohene-Frempong is the co-founder of the Clear Language Group, a consortium of health literacy experts; she is also a founding member of the Partnership for Clear Health Communication, a national coalition. Her extensive consulting experience as President of J O Frempong & Associates has given her considerable insight into how writers can present understandable health information in a reader-friendly format.

While many writers are aware of tension that exists between the need to make information more accessible to lay audiences and the dangers of "dumbing down," Ohene-Frempong's presentation vividly illustrated just how difficult it is for many people to understand health information and how critical understanding is to positive health outcomes. Ohene-Frempong showed a video of interviews conducted with several patients and caretakers who had differing levels of education and faced various health issues. The interviews drove home how hard it is to be a patient and how easy it is to make a mistake in taking or giving medications, especially for the 40 million Americans who are functionally illiterate and the many more who read at marginal levels or whose eyesight is poor.

Those who are highly literate often have difficulty imagining the "parallel universe" of consumers with low health literacy. Many consumers do not understand the meanings of words commonly used in drug

labeling, such as "discontinue." They may confuse teaspoons and tablespoons or misread dosing charts. Patients with poor eyesight may be unable to see markings on syringes or to read dosage directions. Patients and caregivers may be embarrassed to admit that they cannot comprehend written material or they may feel overwhelmed by complex instructions. These situations can lead to noncompliance with treatment regimens or even fatal mistakes. Ohene-Frempong noted that new medications, briefer doctor visits, and shortened hospital stays have amplified patients' responsibilities in managing their own care regimens and increased the potential for errors. She outlined areas, such as congestive heart failure and asthma, where recent medical advances have led to much more complex disease management procedures.

Low health literacy makes it difficult for patients to know which questions to ask and what information they should volunteer to their doctors. The Agency for Health Care Research and Quality reviewed studies of patient knowledge on health issues. The study found that patients with low health literacy received less screening and preventative care, had many more hospital stays, and failed to seek treatment promptly because they did not know their symptoms were illness-related (e.g., not recognizing extreme thirst as a possible symptom of diabetes.) Even though one-on-one education is time-consuming and expensive, it is not nearly as expensive as a hospital stay, says Ohene-Frempong.

Improved communication will result in better medical outcomes,

See Dumbing it Down on 5.

News from National

By Lori De Milto and
Scott Metsger

AMWA-DVC is the largest of 20 AMWA chapters, with 872 members; this is 17% of AMWA's total membership of 5,230.

65th Annual Conference

Pittsburgh, Pa., September 29-October 1 (Confirmed as of 3/31/05):

- 59 core curriculum workshops (4 NEW)
- 16 advanced curriculum workshops (3 NEW)
- 10 non-credit workshops (5 NEW)
- 11 open sessions (included in registration fee)
- 20 short courses (included in registration fee)
- 62 roundtables
- 8 posters
- DVC participation: Two DVC members are on the Annual Conference Committee: Brian Bass is Poster Presentation Coordinator and Lori De Milto is Thursday Roundtable Coordinator.

Future Annual Conferences

- 2006: October 26-28, Albuquerque, N.M.
- 2007: October 11-13, Atlanta, Ga.
- 2008: October 23-25, Louisville, Ky.
- 2009: October 22-24, Dallas, Tx.

Enhanced AMWA Web site

AMWA (www.amwa.org) now has an online membership directory. Beginning this summer, AMWA will be licensing Harrison's Online for members only and adding a list of resources for medical writers.

Professional Development Certificate

Members will soon be able to earn a Professional Development Certificate for AMWA and other professional

See National on 5.

AMWA-DVC Celebrates Long-Term Members

We would like to recognize AMWA-DVC members who have achieved 10 or more years of AMWA membership. This includes three members with 25 years of membership. Congratulations to:

25 years – AMWA Members since 1980

- Bernice Heller, Philadelphia, Pa.
- Thomas R. Henzel, Philadelphia, Pa.
- Joel H. Tau, Wilmington, Del.

20 years – AMWA Members since 1985

- Carolyn C. Bringhurst, Wayne, Pa.
- Gail F. Johnson, Fort Washington, Pa.
- Ralph M. Myerson, MD, Merion Station, Pa.
- Amy Rothman Schonfeld, PhD, Milltown, N.J.

15 years – AMWA Members since 1990

- Jo Anne-Marie Blyskal, Wilmington, Del.
- Jane L. Conley, Carlisle, Pa.
- Elizabeth Fletcher, Philadelphia, Pa.
- Judith Gandy, Philadelphia, Pa.
- Jamie A. Grattan, PhD, Bridgewater, N.J.
- Lynne Griffiths, PhD, Media, Pa.
- Linda M. Hand, King of Prussia, Pa.
- Arthur D. Hartman, PhD, Downingtown, Pa.
- Katherine Hoffman, MS, Stockton, N.J.
- Susan Jacovino, Philadelphia, Pa.
- Michael Josbena, Wallingford, Pa.
- Jacqueline B. Krebs, King of Prussia, Pa.
- Margaret Leahy, Philadelphia, Pa.
- Phoebe H. Lohmar, PhD, New Hope, Pa.

- Rick Mentley, Audubon, Pa.
- Barbara Rinehart, Malvern, Pa.
- Marcia L. Skoglund, PhD, Wayne, Pa.
- Russ M. Sprague, MA, Paoli, Pa.
- Judith A. Swan, PhD, Highland Park, N.J.
- Robert H. Tannen, PhD, Princeton, N.J.

10 years – AMWA Members since 1995

- Joan C. Affleck, MA, ELS, Great Valley, Pa.
- Tuli Ahmed, Blue Bell, Pa.
- Beverly K. Bach, Chadds Ford, Pa.
- Laini Berlin, Aston, Pa.
- Joanne M. Bicknese, DVM, MS, ELS, Cream Ridge, N.J.
- Felicia DelBuono, BS, MT (ASCP), Elverson, Pa.
- Susan K. Casey, Phoenixville, Pa.
- Harry W. Golden, Limerick, Pa.
- Ann L. Grim, Landenberg, Pa.
- Neil R. Grobman, PhD, Wilmington, Del.

- Nancy A. Hemphill, ELS, Thorofare, N.J.
- Neil A. Izenberg, MD, Wilmington, Del.
- Virginia A. LiVolsi, MD, Philadelphia, Pa.
- Barbara G. Miller, Avondale, Pa.
- Patricia D. Novak, PhD, Haddon Twp, N.J.
- Michael Kay Oluwole, DVM, Roslyn, Pa.
- Steven L. Pessagno, Philadelphia, Pa.
- Maurice J. Rosenstrauss, PhD, Somerset, N.J.
- Linda C. Rumbol, MS, Mantua, N.J.
- Mary Beth Salvati, Lansdale, Pa.
- David K. Schroeder, MS, Wynnewood, Pa.
- Judith B. Sherwood, PhD, Lower Gwynedd, Pa.
- Mary Anne Talle, Raritan, N.J.

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Understanding the Employer Perspective

From the Freelance Workshop

By Maitland Young, PhD

What key factors do employers look for when hiring freelance medical writers? Richard Feldesman, co-owner and principal writer for The Writers' Bloc, a writing company that provides professional writing services for medical and advertising companies, presented the perspective of a client seeking a freelance medical writer. Meeting client expectations and working with organizations that contract with freelancers were two key areas of the presentation.

Feldesman noted that freelancers are selected by his clients primarily on the basis of experience in a specific disease area or product class and in specific deliverables. "You, the candidate, should be an expert, one who can 'talk the current talk' in the area. And, in this 24/7 world, *surely* you are always available, can meet all deadlines, and can read the client's mind."

Prospective Clients

Who are the prospective clients and what are their personalities? Clients include pharmaceutical companies, agencies, communication and production companies, and companies focused on training. Pharma companies are generally the best prospects, usually being genuine and flexible (and they pay well). Agencies deal with information filtered from pharma; they are keeping more work in-house, and, as a result, declining as a source for freelancers. Big production companies can be "shells," involved in putting together multi-media presentations and meeting materials, as well as managing the logistics and

See *EMPLOYER* on 5.

UPCOMING MEETING from 1

Details

- Wednesday, June 29: 5:30 p.m. Networking, 6:00 p.m. Dinner, 7:00 p.m. Annual Business Meeting, Elections, and Speaker
- Margaret Kuo's Restaurant, 175 East Lancaster Avenue, Wayne, Pa. 1-610-688-7200
- Cost with advance reservation: Members: \$35, Nonmembers: \$40, Students: \$10.
At the door: \$10 more, SPACE PERMITTING

Reservations

- By e-mail: Deborah Early: debbie.early@verizon.net. Please mail your check after e-mailing your reservation.
- By mail: Karen Dutka, 103 Canterbury Way, Princeton, NJ 08540. Reservations and checks (payable to AMWA-DVC) must be received in advance to guarantee your reservation.
- Advance reservations accepted until noon, Wednesday, June 22. No refunds for cancellations received after June 24.
NO-SHOWS WILL BE BILLED.

Menu

Margaret Kuo's banquet menu includes soup, appetizer, entree, dessert, and tea. Each course will be offered on a revolving table and will include dishes prepared with beef, chicken, and shrimp. You may request a vegetarian entree with your advance reservation.

Directions

The restaurant is located 1 mile west of The Radnor Hotel on Lancaster Avenue.

From I-476 (Blue Route), take Exit 13 (St. Davids/Villanova, Route 30). At the bottom of Exit 13, turn left onto Route 30 West (Lancaster Avenue). After passing the business complex with the Radnor Hotel, proceed to the third traffic light. Margaret Kuo's is on the right.

Landmarks

- First light is St. David's Road (apartment buildings)
- Second light is Aberdeen Avenue (gas stations and brick church)
- Third light is Louella Avenue. Margaret Kuo's is on the right side and St. Mary's Church on the left.

Parking

Free parking on Lancaster Ave after 6:00 p.m. Parking is easiest in the block before (east of) Margaret Kuo's. Alternative is to turn left onto Louella at Margaret Kuo's. Parking is available in front of and across from St. Mary's church. Also, there is ample parking half a block down on Louella at the school sports field.

DUMBING IT DOWN from 2

less anxiety, and higher rates of compliance, while reducing clinicians' legal liability. One study showed that clinician communication and attitude are responsible for 75% of lawsuits brought by patients against medical providers. These cases stem from poor explanations of diagnosis and treatment options, clinicians' devaluing patients' statements about their own symptoms, and patients' feeling ignored or rushed by busy practitioners. Ohene-Frempong also noted that informed consent forms cannot protect providers against liability if the patient does not in fact fully understand the risks.

Even among patients with good reading skills, written materials can be too technical, too long, or poorly designed and formatted. Text should immediately stress what is important to the targeted audience and explain medical terms. Layout should incorporate adequate "white space" and avoid large blocks of text. Design should be visually appealing and use appropriate illustrations.

Ohene-Frempong contrasted the "medical model," in which the writer focuses on diseases, symptoms, and treatment with the "patient-centered model," where the emphasis is on what the patient needs to know. For

instance, most people don't want to know the statistics on prevalence and change in the incidence of a particular disorder; they do need to know what to look for and to remember what they've read. She contrasted the tone of the cheerleader with that of the taskmaster and urged the audience to think about how to make the pitch most effective. The message, Ohene-Frempong says, should be one of hope, empowerment, respect, and dignity.

Of course, says Ohene-Frempong, you can dumb it down too much or bore your readers to death as well. To keep it simple but interesting, she suggests the following:

- Use simple sentences
- Define specialized terms
- Say who is affected by a medical condition
- Tell people what their risks are so they are motivated to seek care
- Give directions so that people know what to do
- Give people the good news as well as the bad
- Know your audience and what motivates them

See Dumbing it Down on 6.

NATIONAL from 2

development activities. Members will be able to earn points for things such as attending a chapter meeting, serving as a chapter officer, publishing an article in the *AMWA Journal*, and completing a relevant university-level course. Look for complete details from national soon. PLEASE NOTE: members are responsible for verifying their attendance at events. AMWA will post blank receipts on its Web site which members can bring to DVC

events. Cancelled checks also serve as proof.

- Science certificate: AMWA is looking into starting a science certificate.
- Self-study (can be taken for core curriculum credit or used for reference): "Basic Grammar" is available for purchase via AMWA's Web site (www.amwa.org). "Punctuation" is in development. Other courses will be developed.

In the next issue: Profile of AMWA members.

AMWA-DVC Adds Web Content

AMWA-DVC has two new sections on our Web site (www.amwa-dvc.org):

- Getting Started in Medical Writing
- Freelance Resources for Medical Writers.

Each section contains a wealth of information from our workshops on these topics, as well as some general resources. We are in the process of adding more content to these sections.

Much thanks to Web master Dorit Shapiro for adding these two sections.

EMPLOYER from 4

entertainment at meetings. A caveat: they may not be supportive when push comes to shove. In Feldesman's experience, communication companies have been unpredictable and can be inept at project management. Who are other good prospects? A bright future seems to lie with training companies, because the pharma industry has large sales forces and spends enormous dollars on training them.

Now, how to get there?

Some suggestions from Feldesman:

- Leverage your experience
- Expand your knowledge and skills
- Get to know your client
- *Cover your backside!*

Maitland Young is a freelance medical writer and healthcare consultant with wide experience in clinical evaluations, quality assurance, and diagnostic product support. He now focuses on pharmaceutical publications, CME, and regulatory submissions.



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News and notes from the American Medical Writers Association— Delaware Valley Chapter

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DUMBING IT DOWN from 5

- Use colloquial language when appropriate
- Emphasize that people have the power to make choices
- Simplify quantitative concepts and convert raw numbers to understandable percentages, using comparisons people can relate to
- Use headings, bullets, white space, italics, underlining, and font styles to make material more comprehensible
- Field-test results against a good cross-section of your intended audience.

Christina M. Valente is a Philadelphia-based freelance writer focusing on medical, legal, and environmental topics. She also teaches at two Philadelphia area universities.

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