

# DELAWRITER

The quarterly newsletter of AMWA-DVC

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## Winter 2014

### AMWA's 2014 Conference: One for the Books

The 74th AMWA Annual Conference in Memphis, Tenn., held this past October, featured 47 sessions, 75 roundtable discussions, 60 workshops, and six networking events. Attendees from the DVC chapter were well represented and were featured during several of the named lectures. About 25 DVC members met for the chapter's Greet 'N' Go, headed down to Beale Street, and enjoyed some traditional southern cuisine at the Blues City Café (coordinated this year by Lori De Milto, MJ).

The next few issues of Delawriter will recap some of the highlights of this year's conference.

### Too Much of the Wrong Kind of Health News

*By Lori De Milto*

A "daily drumbeat of dreck" is the mainstay of much of healthcare journalism, said Gary Schwitzer, BA, publisher of HealthNewsReview.org and winner of AMWA's 2014 McGovern Medal Award. Schwitzer addressed the AMWA the 2014 Annual Conference in Memphis, Tenn., in October. Many health news stories emphasize or exaggerate potential benefits, minimize or ignore potential harms, and ignore cost, rather than helping readers and viewers understand the evidence behind treatments, tests, products, and procedures.

"Many healthcare journalists write as if all the evidence is in, especially for newer, costlier interventions. Almost always, it is not," said Schwitzer, who is also an adjunct associate professor at the University of Minnesota School of Public Health. Although unprecedented peaks of excellence in healthcare journalism exist, the "increasing amount of dreck" threatens to overwhelm the good achieved.

[HealthNewsReview.org](http://HealthNewsReview.org) features reviewers from all aspects of healthcare journalism, who use 10 criteria to review news stories that make therapeutic claims about treatments, tests, products, and procedures, he said. Each criterion starts by asking: "Does the story. . .":

1. adequately discuss the costs of the intervention?
2. adequately quantify the benefits of the treatment/test/product/procedure?
3. adequately explain/quantify the harms of the intervention?
4. seem to grasp the quality of the evidence?
5. commit disease-mongering? (Does the story exaggerate the seriousness or prevalence of a condition?)
6. use independent sources and identify conflicts of interest?
7. compare the new approach with existing alternatives?
8. establish the availability of the treatment/test/product/procedure?
9. establish the true novelty of the approach?
10. appear to rely solely or largely on a news release?

## Health News Stories Get An Unsatisfactory Report Card

Of 1,889 health news stories reviewed from April 2006 through May 2013, most (57% to 69%) unsatisfactorily discussed costs, benefits, harms, quality of the evidence, and comparison of the new approach to alternatives. The most common flaw was conveying a certainty that doesn't exist by:

- Exaggerating effect size
- Using causal language to describe observational studies
- Failing to explain limitations of surrogate markers/endpoints
- Presenting single-source stories with no independent perspective
- Failing to independently analyze the quality of the evidence.

## Positive Spin and Lack of Knowledge Harm the Public

Some examples of what Schwitzer calls "dreck" include a 2013 NBC News story on a cure for baldness-based on a mouse experiment with five successful results. Another example was a 2012 CNN story proclaiming that a cure for cancer was within reach, based on a single new program at a medical center. "We're washing over the American public with a tsunami of crap and not focusing on the things that are important," Schwitzer said.

Healthcare journalists should be helping people understand that:

- In healthcare, newer isn't always better... more isn't always better... less can be more.
- Bad things happen when normal states of health are re-defined as illnesses requiring treatment
- Every healthcare decision involves tradeoffs: something to be gained but also something to be lost.

There is too much of the "wrong kind of health news," Schwitzer said, noting that about half of press releases and news stories have a positive spin. Many journalists, however, lack the necessary knowledge to confirm the claim in the data, which leads to misleading people in their articles and giving the reader false hope, Schwitzer said.

*Lori De Milto, MJ, is a freelance medical writer specializing in*

## Eastern Publication Bias Focus of Swanberg Address

*By Jennifer Minarcik*

When J. Patrick Barron, professor emeritus, Tokyo Medical University, first moved to Japan as a student, "I had no idea my career would lead me to this award," referring to the Harold Swanberg Distinguished Service Award, presented each year during the AMWA annual conference to "an active member who has made distinguished contributions to medical communication or rendered unusual and distinguished services to the medical profession."

Barron joked that during his early years in Japan, he was once referred to as the "kingyo no fun;" which translated means "the excrement trailing behind the goldfish."

Barron has had a distinguished career: During his time in Japan, he pioneered the idea of a medical communication center that could provide support to authors and help facilitate research information out of the country (a difficult chore, in that most Japanese scientists were not fluent in English at the time). He promoted English for medical purposes and education throughout Japan, and he created a novel website dedicated to assisting authors who wish to publish their findings in journals outside Japan.

### Outstanding Service; A Call to Action

He recalled one instance where an English publication rejected a paper Barron had edited on behalf of his Japanese colleagues as "needing a native English speaker." When Barron wrote to the journal, explaining that he was not only a native English speaker but had undergraduate degrees in English, and queried about the specifics of the editors' statements, his letter went unanswered. "But several months later, the paper was published in its entirety," he said. Even today, there remains an Eastern publication bias that Japanese and Asian authors continue to face when trying to publish an article in English. Barron also discussed the need for international standards to globalize English for medical purposes throughout the world.

Barron concluded his lecture by challenging audience members. "Why is AMWA not in Asia?" he asked. He suggested that "working together to facilitate improvement in medical communication globally" could be the catalyst for accelerated treatments and better healthcare. He believes AMWA members are "the perfect group of communicators" to join him in this cause.

For more information on J. Patrick Barron and his efforts, visit his website at [www.Ronbun.jp](http://www.Ronbun.jp)

### Sablack Awards

Also during the awards luncheon, the 2014 Golden Apple Award

was presented to AMWA-DVC's Thomas Gegeny, MA, ELS, for his excellence in workshop leadership.

The 2014 Fellowship to 3 outstanding AMWA members, among them AMWA-DVC Freelance Conference Chair Lori De Milto. Other recipients included JoAnne McAndrews, PhD, and Deborah Whitppen. An honorary fellowship was awarded this year to Justina Molzon, MS, JD, of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for her efforts in fostering relationships between medical communicators and the FDA.

*Jennifer Minarcik, MS, is a freelance science and medical writer.*

## Medical Writers Help Break the Wall of Silence

*By Kristine Shields*

Each year, AMWA honors a distinguished writer for excellence in communicating healthcare issues in the public domain. This year's Walter C. Alvarez award was presented to Rosemary Gibson, MSc, on October 11 at the 2014 AMWA Annual Conference in Memphis, Tenn. Gibson is known for her ground-breaking work in giving voice to patients who have experienced preventable injury or death within the US healthcare system.

### Giving Voice to the Patient and Their Caregivers

Upon accepting the award, Gibson, senior advisor to The Hastings Center and section editor for the "Less Is More Perspectives" in *JAMA Internal Medicine*, candidly discussed her path to writing about her passion.

Stating that "data persuade, but emotions motivate," Gibson described the process of writing two books that shared the stories of people whose lives have been affected by preventable medical errors or unnecessary treatments:

- Wall of Science: The Untold Story of the Medical Mistakes that Kill and Injure Millions of Americans (2003)
- The Treatment Trap: How the Overuse of Medical Care Is Wrecking Your Health and What You Can Do to Prevent It (2010)

(All of Gibson's books are available at [this link](#))

### Finding the Courage to Speak Up

Gibson spoke about her struggles to expose the "shame and blame" culture within the medical profession.

Having worked for more than 16 years in palliative care at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, she spoke of the courage it took to publish a book about the fallibility of healthcare providers like her colleagues, her mentors, and her friends. But ultimately Gibson found comfort, safety, and camaraderie from those very colleagues. All of us, she said, regardless of income, education, or position, are vulnerable to medical errors.

Her greatest joy, she said, is "hearing from people who are alive" because of her work.

## Writing for the Public Good

Calling medical errors "the only leading cause of mortality that we do not count," Gibson stated, "We need to talk about it and measure it in order to fix it." She credits the work of medical writers and publishers that has led to increased awareness of patient risk including:

- The routine publication of hospital readmission rates
- Papers addressing the overuse of procedures, tests, and technologies like back surgeries and CT scans
- Studies indicating that malpractice rates go down when hospitals and healthcare providers are more forthcoming about errors
- The resulting increased awareness has led to changes in practice that support patient safety:
- The marking of the location on the body where the surgery will be performed before the patient is sedated
- [The Choosing Wisely Campaign](#) wherein medical specialists identify the top five categories of patient risks and publish the steps they are taking to reduce them

Gibson praised AMWA and its members for raising the standards for medical communications that "help the public make good health decisions." She encouraged the membership to listen to ordinary people, to tell their stories, and to "speak truth for those who are afraid to speak up." She concluded by reminding AMWA members that our work makes a difference to real people and our writing is "a vehicle for public change and for public good."

### Comments from conference attendees:

"Rosemary was a powerful speaker who challenged the audience to always keep the patient in mind."

- Randi Redmond Oster, Author, *Questioning Protocol*

"I appreciated Rosemary's advice to keep our ears to the ground for personal stories - or more like 3 feet above the ground - because those personal stories hold the answers as well as the issues."

- Alison Muller PharmD, Acri Muller Consulting, LLC

*Kristine Shields, MSN, DrPH, is a freelance at Shields' Medical Writing.*

## Freelances Should Analyze Business Goals Yearly

*By Cindy Shaler*

AMWA-DVC members and co-authors Cindy Kryder and Brian Bass explained the value to freelances of performing periodic SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analyses. Their open session on this topic at the 2014 AMWA Annual Conference in Memphis, Tenn., led attendees through the

process of evaluating a business using this planning tool. By "writing down and thinking about these aspects of your business at least once a year, you can better identify the types of clients with whom you can work, the kinds of projects that best suit you, clients and projects to avoid, and situations to improve," Bass said.

### Identifying Business Strengths and Weaknesses

Kryder and Bass recommend using a matrix to write down a company's SWOT elements. Strengths are characteristics necessary to build or enhance, they said. They likely include skills or education (eg, excellent indexer, PhD in biochemistry, expert with PowerPoint), qualities and abilities (patience with clients, good at project planning), and resources and assets (both Mac and PC machines and software, experience with commercial printing). Consider both technical and people skills, they said.

Weaknesses are characteristics or qualities that freelancers need to address or reduce, they said. These might include tasks that trigger discomfort (eg, negotiating prices with clients), strengths to acquire (an advanced degree perceived as necessary), or characteristics that interfere with meeting goals (poor marketing skills).

"Just because you have a weakness or missing skill doesn't mean you need to learn it yourself; maybe you need to hire someone, like an accountant or marketing professional," Kryder said.

### Business Opportunities and Threats

These last two components comprise elements of the marketplace that affect a business and might include economic fluctuations, business layoffs, new drug approvals or denials, or the fate of investigational drugs prior to submission for licensure. Kryder and Bass suggested several online resources that may help identify opportunities and threats:

- [SmartBrief.com](http://SmartBrief.com)-enter an industry at the home page
- [FiercePharma.com](http://FiercePharma.com)
- [FierceHealthcare.com](http://FierceHealthcare.com)
- [Pharmalot.com](http://Pharmalot.com)
- [Pharmatimes.com](http://Pharmatimes.com)
- [Biospace.com](http://Biospace.com)

An upturn in the general economy, for example, may mean that businesses will be willing to spend more on freelance contracts. US Food and Drug Administration approval of a new product could become an opportunity for additional articles or training materials. Conversely, denial or delay of product licensure can be a threat or an opportunity. Another threat might be layoffs in the publishing industry, resulting in a surfeit of editors looking for the same projects as an established freelance.

Only by understanding these strengths and weaknesses "can you plan where to market your business in the coming year," Bass said.

*Cynthia M. Shaler provides editorial and design services for medical, technical, and education clients. She specializes in creating books, user guides, brochures, and newsletters.*

# Maximizing Your LinkedIn Presence

*By Ruwaida Vakil*

Maximizing your LinkedIn profile is critical for success in today's age of social media networking. Donna Serdula, LinkedIn consultant and author of *LinkedIn Makeover*, highlighted ways for medical writers to optimize their LinkedIn presence at AMWA-DVC's 12th Annual Freelance Conference held on March 22, 2014, in Philadelphia.

## The Power of LinkedIn

LinkedIn is the world largest professional network. Eighty percent of companies use social media for recruitment; 95% of these companies use LinkedIn, according to Serdula.

LinkedIn helps medical writers:

- Establish a professional brand
- Keep in touch with connections
- Find experts, ideas, and inspiration
- Discover new opportunities.

## 5 Tips to Crank Up Impact and Results

Serdula presented 5 key tips to maximize your LinkedIn presence.

### 1. Optimize your profile

A professional headshot and a powerful headline are key components to a good profile. "Don't cut and paste information from a resume into your LinkedIn profile," Serdula advises. Instead, she suggests that members write an interesting summary and include complete information about their experience in a way that optimizes keywords that will show up in search results. "Spread the keywords throughout your profile," she says.

Include your contact information. Serdula recommends both a phone number and an e-mail address.

### 2. Build and use your network

Connect, connect, connect, Serdula says, who considers LinkedIn a digital Rolodex. "Connecting with someone on LinkedIn does not mean you endorse them," she says. Also request introductions from others in your network.

Search results on LinkedIn are based on your connections. The more connections you have, the more chances you have of being in someone's search results. LinkedIn searches and lists results based on your connections and their subsequent connections. The search will show results up to third-degree connections.

Joining groups is also an effective way to increase your visibility and network. All members in a group show up as third-degree connections, thereby increasing your visibility in a search.

### 3. Pay some money

For about \$100 a year, Serdula recommends upgrading the free, basic account to a "personal plus" account. This gives you access to more search results for more introductions, InMail messages, a

profile organizer, a premium badge, and the OpenLink network. (Find out how to do this on Serdula's [website](#). Look for: CHEAP DISCOUNTED LINKEDIN PLAN).

#### 4. Share status updates

Regularly share updates, articles, and other information relevant to your work, which LinkedIn broadcasts to your connections. Interact with your connections by not only posting your updates but also reading and commenting on their updates. "Keep your status updates professional by sharing expert advice, compelling articles, relevant events, etc. Do not share personal thoughts or photos," Serdula says.

#### 5. Stay Positive, Have Fun

In order to benefit from LinkedIn, you need to contribute to it, Serdula says. Use LinkedIn to educate, inspire, and add value not only to your work but to the work of others. Join groups and share your ideas.

### LinkedIn Resources

Get Serdula's [free LinkedIn resources](#).

[Learn more](#) about LinkedIn Makeover and related products and services.

*Ruwaida Vakil, MS, is a freelance medical writer, communications specialist and owner of ProMed Write, LLC. Vakil is also the current secretary for AMWA-DVC.*

## Learn and Network at the 2015 Freelance Conference

*By Lori De Milto*

If you're a freelance medical writer, or thinking about becoming one, don't miss AMWA-DVC's 2015 Freelance Conference, to be held on Saturday, March 28, 2015, at the Crowne Plaza Valley Forge in King of Prussia, Pa.

"Our Freelance Conference offers extraordinary learning and networking for seasoned, new, and aspiring freelance medical writers," says Lori De Milto, MJ, a freelance medical writer since 1997 and one of this year's co-chairs.

"The Freelance Conference is THE event each year where freelancers can come together, share experiences, and learn from one another. Everyone is so welcoming!" says Jennifer Minarcik, MS, a freelance medical writer since 2011.

"Whether you're just starting out, looking for ways to grow your business, or just want to continue to learn and network, this conference offers something for everyone," says Christine Durst, PhD, a freelance medical writer since 2011 and Freelance Conference co-chair.

This year, AMWA-DVC is introducing two interactive sessions on challenges and best practices: one for aspiring and newer freelancers and one for seasoned pros. As always, the conference will feature presentations on key topics in freelancing, a networking

luncheon, and roundtable discussions.

"This is the one conference a year where I know my investment is worthwhile before I even set foot in the door," says Michelle Dalton, ELS, a freelance medical writer since 2006.

## Get Involved

Gain new skills and build your network even more as a member of the Freelance Conference Committee.

"Being involved in AMWA events is an easy way to get to know work colleagues," adds Melissa L. Bogen, ELS, a freelance medical editor since 1997. "We often refer work to one another based on relationships built through volunteering together." Bogen is a member of the Empire State chapter, and as an active participant in various AMWA activities, is serving as the third co-chair of AMWA-DVC's 2015 Freelance Conference.

We have many volunteer opportunities available, with varying time commitments. To learn more, or to volunteer, email:

[freelance@amwa-dvc.org](mailto:freelance@amwa-dvc.org).

## Register Early

The full program for the Freelance Conference will be posted on [DVC's website](#) by January 2015. We expect a large crowd this year, so register early.

If you're a member of DVC, you'll receive an email when the conference brochure is ready. If you're not already an AMWA member or are in a different chapter, email [freelance@amwa-dvc.org](mailto:freelance@amwa-dvc.org) to join our email list.

*Lori De Milto, MJ, is a freelance medical writer specializing in targeted medical marketing communications and author of The Mighty Marketer: Your Guide to Making More Money as a Freelance Medical Writer.*

## Volunteer Corner

Every June, AMWA-DVC volunteers take on their new roles (some keep them from year to year, some are elected positions that have a 12-month tenure). Here, to make it easier for our members, we're including some of the volunteers and how to reach them. If you have any ideas for upcoming programs, articles you'd like to see or write, or general questions/comments about AMWA-DVC, use the emails below to reach officers and committee chairs.

## Some Key AMWA-DVC Volunteer Email Addresses

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