

AMWA Annual Conference

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The 58th Annual Conference of the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) was held in beautiful Vancouver, British Columbia, on 28-31 October 1998. Featuring 80 workshops on various topics in medical writing and editing and 12 general or plenary sessions on different medical and professional topics, the conference attracted 671 registrants from North America, Europe, and Asia.

A Cross-Cultural Plenary

The general session, "Healing the Spirit: The Power of Communication in a Changing World", was a presentation by Michael Thrasher, a First Nations healer and activist. (His opening remark: "I am not an Indian. Chris [Columbus] was lost.")

Thrasher's comments on how First Nations peoples have been treated by Europeans ranged from incredible to chilling. For example, some, if not most, tribal names with which most of us are familiar are not the names used by the First Nations peoples; rather, they are terms from European languages, especially French, that early settlers bestowed on these groups. In other words, even today, we do not know how First Nations peoples refer to themselves, much less grant them the dignity of identifying them as they wish to be identified. Thrasher also spoke of how representatives of the Canadian government had, in the past, openly and intentionally sought to prevent political activity among the groups by encouraging heavy drinking.

Thrasher provided some interesting insights into how First Nations peoples use community support in healing, especially the communal nature of the sweat lodge, which has been used to treat cancerous tumors and has attracted the attention of the medical-science community as well. He also described the use of fasting and

exhaustion to induce insights. These activities and the associated insights are regarded as essential to spiritual and physical health.

Thrasher's portrayal of the traditional life styles of First Nations peoples as a cultural ideal had some appeal, but I believe the picture he painted was a bit too idealistic and even perhaps stereotypical. I became skeptical when he credited chelation therapy for his success in recovering from a heart attack and went on to endorse what many would consider to be pseudo-scientific or fringe health beliefs. Still, it was an engaging presentation that opened the door a little wider into the culture of First Nations peoples.

Caplan, Suzuki Speak

Arthur L Caplan, director of the Center for Bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania Medical Center, was the John P McGovern Award recipient. He received rave reviews for his luncheon presentation, "Can the Media Keep Pace with the Genetic Revolution? From Dolly to Dr. Seed".

Caplan termed popular communication on cloning "a failure". He noted, for example, that although incentives exist mainly to clone animals, the mass media have focused largely on the prospect of cloning humans. He emphasized that not only genes affect development, but also environment, and he observed that genetics has inherited fears associated with the Cold War and nuclear power. Regarding human cloning, Caplan identified as the basic issue whether it is good for the cloned person. "There's lots of baggage", he said, "in the life of a clone."

Publications by Caplan include *Due Consideration: Controversy in an Age of Medical Miracles*, *Moral Matters*, and *Prescribing Our Future: Ethical Challenges in Genetic Counseling*.

Environmentalist David T Suzuki received the Walter C Alvarez Award. Author of *The Sacred Balance: Rediscovering Our Place in Nature* and host of *The Nature of Things* for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Suzuki is an

associate at the Sustainable Development Research Institute at the University of British Columbia.

In his luncheon presentation, Suzuki criticized members of our culture for viewing people mainly as consumers and losing sight of the whole. In contrast to earlier thinking, he stated, the environment and humans should not be seen as separate; rather, "we are the earth." "What we do to the earth", he concluded, "we do to ourselves, our children, and all future generations."

In Other Plenaries

The editing-writing plenary session, chaired by Faith McLellan of the University of Texas Medical Branch included presentations by Bill Silberg of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and Michael McCarthy of *The Lancet*. Discussing standards for health information on the World Wide Web, Silberg said that a site should specify the authorship of the material posted, the source of the information, the ownership of the site, and the timeliness of the material. He argued against trying to ensure quality by centralizing review or imposing new regulations.

McCarthy said that for scientific papers presented on the Web, the IMRAD format (Introduction, Methods, Results, and Discussion) might not prove most suitable. He also mentioned that *The Lancet* tries to publish papers within 3 months of submission and has a fast-track system in which especially timely and important papers can be published within 4 weeks.

The educators plenary session focused largely on innovative courses and programs in the Northwest. Deborah L Illman of the University of Washington discussed how a new magazine, *Northwest Science & Technology*, will serve as a cornerstone for an undergraduate curriculum in science writing. Valerie J Vance of the Oregon Institute of Technology described a technical-communication course offered via the Internet to registered health professionals, such as radiologic technologists and dental hygienists, who are working toward their

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bachelor's degrees.

AMWA-CBE Members Honored

Barbara Gastel MD was awarded AMWA's highest honor: the Harold Swanberg Distinguished Service Award. This award, named for the founder of AMWA, is given for outstanding service to the profession of medical writing. Gastel's international work with medical writers and medical-writing programs, her achievements in directing the science-writing master's degree program at Texas A&M University, her teaching and committee work in AMWA and CBE, her publications, and her recent appointment as editor of CBE Views testify to the breadth,

depth, and quality of her contributions.

Marianne Mallia, senior medical writer and manager of the Section of Scientific Publications at the Texas Heart Institute, received the Golden Apple Award as outstanding workshop leader. Her advanced workshop on medical writing is one of the most popular AMWA courses.

The association also inducted 3 new fellows, 2 of whom are long-time CBE members. Florence M (Flo) Witte, a medical writer who recently left the Kentucky Spine Institute for the St Jude Children's Research Hospital, has taught many workshops for AMWA at regional and national conferences

and has been a chapter president.

Lanie Adamson, a writer at Pacific Communications, a division of Allergan Pharmaceuticals, has served on AMWA's Board of Directors and taught workshops on project management. She has also been active in the Asilomar Conference sponsored by the northern and southern California chapters of AMWA.

The next annual conference will be held on 27-30 October 1999 at the Philadelphia Marriott. 