

AMWA Conference Highlights

Judith McIntosh White

New technology and familiar subjects occupied discussion for the more than 700 participants attending the 60th annual conference of the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) in Miami, Florida, on 8-11 November 2000. About 170 new AMWA members joined veteran members at activities centered on the theme "New Horizons for Biomedical Communicators in the 21st Century".

Plenary Sessions: Innovative Technology, Practical Advice

The editors-writers plenary session, "Electronic Repositories for Biomedical Information", addressed emerging technology. Chaired by Nancy D Taylor, medical research writer in ethics and humanities for the Greenville Hospital System, the session featured talks by Pritpal S Tamber and Addeane S Caelleigh.

Tamber, a physician and the Web editor for BioMed Central in London, reviewed efforts by libraries and publishers to build full-text, searchable online repositories for biomedical research publications.

"These efforts have in common concerns about permanence and visibility to and credibility with the research community and the public", Tamber said. "In particular, BioMed Central is attempting to establish its own peer-reviewed online research journals, permitting free access to full text of articles and subsequently uploading papers straight into PubMed Central, the electronic repository of the National Library of Medicine in Washington, DC."

Tamber said his organization hopes to develop new data-processing techniques and higher-quality filters to speed up peer

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review and reduce the potential for information overload in Web users.

Caelleigh, editor of *Academic Medicine*, warned that researchers, writers, editors, and other information producers and users need to be concerned with the long-term consequences of technologic change. "We need to consider how our lives would be different if we moved more exclusively to an electronic publishing environment", Caelleigh said. "If we use foresight, we can build changes into the system to make it more friendly, working out processes to help achieve long-term goals."

Caelleigh urged medical writers and editors to develop awareness that new

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Barbara Gastel, of Texas A&M University, chaired the paper-presentation plenary, "Scanning the Horizons of Biomedical Communication". The 10 papers addressed historical and social horizons, horizons in program design, and horizons in biomedical-communication practice. A paper on orienting freelance contractors included perspectives from a freelance editor and an employer of such editors.

Other plenaries focused on innovative applications of technology, on practical advice for medical writers and editors, and on subjects of continuing debate in the field. Section plenaries included "Using the Internet to

Communicate Your Health Care Message" (Educators Section), "The Good Publication Practice: Guidelines for Pharmaceutical Companies" (Pharmaceutical Section), and "Making the Transition from Health Care Professional to Medical Writer: The Promise and Pitfalls of Writing in the Pharmaceutical Industry" (Freelance Section). There were also three special forums: "The Virtual Office: Making the Technology of the 21st Century Work for You", "The IRS Criteria: Independent Contractor or Employee?—and Other Issues", and "Biomedical Ethics: Gray Matters, Redux".

General Session: Stem-Cell Research

John D Gearhart, of the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, delivered the keynote address, "Human Pluripotential Stem Cells: Biology, Clinical Application, Ethics, and Politics". Gearhart is credited with the first successful isolation and cloning of human stem cells, an achievement that former National Institutes of Health Director Harold Varmus has called one of the most significant advances in human biology. Gearhart cautioned AMWA writers and editors to get the facts right about stem-cell research.

"Scientists are only one of the groups in the community which will make decisions about what research is to be done in this area and about how the results of that research will be utilized", Gearhart said. "It's important that the public and decision-makers have the facts on which to base decisions that inform policy."

Gearhart's refreshingly simple presentation discussed the nature, functions, and life cycle of stem cells; sources of embryonic cells used in his research; techniques used in experiments; and potential applications of his team's results. Possible future uses of stem-cell research include development of techniques for improved management of chronic diseases, such as diabetes mellitus

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and Parkinson's disease.

"Biologic issues remaining to be solved include isolating the specific cells useful for treatment of a particular disease, developing techniques for expansion of cell numbers without concomitant cell-line aging, directing cell differentiation down desired pathways, isolating the ideal differentiating point in a pathway, and developing efficient grafting procedures", Gearhart said.

Gearhart noted the existence of thorny ethical issues, familiar to experienced researchers, editors, and writers. He observed that there are conflicting opinions on the moral status of an embryo or fetus, on acceptable avenues for procuring stem cells, and on use of results to genetically enhance a particular germline. "Some members of the media and the public have erroneously assumed that our research will guarantee human immortality or that there is a direct causal link between production of human embryonic stem cells and human cloning", Gearhart said. "It is the responsibility of researchers to present candidly the social implications of this research, as well as to help develop and ensure adherence to ethical research guidelines and to educate the public, the media, and the policy-makers."

Swanberg Award: Humanities Professor Anne Hudson Jones

Presentation of the Harold Swanberg Distinguished Service Award to CSE member Anne Hudson Jones highlighted the annual membership dinner. Jones, professor in the Institute for the Medical Humanities of The University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, was a founding editor of the journal *Literature and Medicine* and in 2000 published *Ethical Issues in Biomedical Publication* (coedited with Faith McLellan).

In her remarks, Jones urged renewed concern for using language ethically to communicate health-care issues. "Today, changing language, images, and metaphors reflect fundamental changes in the arena of academic health-science centers", Jones said. "These changes are small, subtle, insignificant, but they are widespread."

Jones cited examples, such as use of the term "large-group activities" for medical-

school lectures, "entities" for departments, "target opportunities" for budget cuts, and "BHAG"—big hairy audacious goal—for future financial opportunities. "Such language changes verge on obfuscation, deception, and Orwellian doublespeak", she observed. "They stem from a modern corporate culture that doesn't fit the values of the world to which it is applied."

Jones expressed particular concern about applying corporate organizational and motivational techniques to teaching hospitals that treat indigent patients. "Indigent patients have no access to alternative health care when teaching hospitals cut their services, no matter what those service cuts are called", she said. "We must become aware of our shared concerns and of the ethical uses of language in medical

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writing, education, teaching, and practice. Concern for the human patient must remain at the heart of all that we do."

McGovern Award: Journalist Andrew Skolnick

Science and medical journalist, photographer, and educator Andrew P Skolnick received the 2000 John P McGovern Medal for excellence in medical communication. Skolnick has researched, written, and edited many articles on medical practice, medical ethics, biomedical research, public health, and social responsibility.

Speaking on one of his favorite topics, "Medical Quackery and the Newsmedia: Part of the Problem, Part of the Solution", Skolnick chastised journalists for substandard coverage of medical news, and he issued a call to get the story right. "A reporter's duty is to find the truth and report it", he said. "Why aren't the media telling us the truth about many medical issues?"

Skolnick said some reasons journalists distort medical stories include reporters'

scientific illiteracy, publications' commercialism, media antiestablishment bias, and "effective organization by the quacks".

"Think natural is safe?" Skolnick quipped, referring to claims by alternative-medicine advocates. "Just ask Socrates."

Alvarez Award: Trauma Surgeon Stephen Cohn

Stephen M Cohn, professor of surgery and chief of the divisions of trauma and surgical critical care at the University of Miami School of Medicine, received the Walter C Alvarez Memorial Award, which recognizes excellence in communicating health-care concepts and developments to the public. AMWA recognized Cohn for his work with law-enforcement officers and educators in Dade County, Florida, to prevent firearm-related violence and reduce vehicle-pedestrian crashes.

Cohn's luncheon address, "The Life of the Flesh Is in the Blood", highlighted the devastating impact of trauma death on the American public. The year 1996 saw almost 175,000 trauma deaths in the United States, and accidents remain the leading cause of death of adults under the age of 44.

Cohn explained that although the transfusion of 13 million units of blood given to patients every year substantially reduces trauma deaths, problems with transfusions remain, including possible antigenic reactions, immunosuppression, and transmission of viral infections. "Most doctors advocate a limited transfusion policy, as the search continues for a safe blood substitute", he observed. "We expect trials soon on an animal hemoglobin-substrate blood substitute, which has been in development for a number of years."

Trauma surgeons as a group are vocal about injury prevention, he noted, advocating both firearm control and automobile safety features that reduce injury. "Injury prevention is what it's all about", Cohn said. "If you don't get injured in the first place, you don't have to worry about trauma care."

Workshops and Roundtables

The conference offered 78 workshops on

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medical writing and editing and on medical topics. Some of these were credit workshops, which AMWA members can take to earn core- and advanced-curriculum certificates, and some were noncredit workshops. Titles of the latter included “Bibliographic Software Basics”, “Using the Internet for Effective Medical Research”, “The NIH Grant Review Process”, “Selecting the Right Journal for Publication”, “The 3 M’s of Medical Writer Training: Mentoring, Motivating, and Managing New Medical Writers”, “Editorial Wisdom: Knowing What to Overlook”, “Web Site Design for Experienced Designers”, and “Uncovering the Secrets of Powerful Presentations”.

Titles and descriptions of AMWA credit courses are listed on the organiza-

tion’s Web site (www.amwa.org).

The conference also included 35 roundtable breakfast sessions and 25 lunch sessions. Among those of particular relevance to editors were “Internet Resources: Sorting the Wheat from the Chaff”, “The Daily Electronic Grind: 24 Hours at WebMD”, “Education in Medical Writing and Editing”, “Role of the Managing Editor of a (Small) Clinical Journal”, “Manuscript Editing: How Much Should You Do?”, “Certification of Editors in the Life Sciences”, “A Discussion on the Grammatical Pitfalls in Editing”, “The Editor’s Dilemma: So Much to Do, So Little Time”, “Justifying Our Existence: Measuring the Value of Medical Editing”, and “A Conversation with Dear Edie about

English Usage”.

AMWA’s next annual conference will be on 24-27 October 2001, in Norfolk, Virginia. Information about the meeting is available on the AMWA Web site.

