

# AMWA Conference Highlights

## Christine Theisen

Where is the practice of medical communication going? Various speakers addressed aspects of this question at the American Medical Writers Association's (AMWA's) 61st annual conference, "Charting Our Course Toward Excellence in Medical Communication". AMWA convened its 2001 annual conference on 24-27 October in Norfolk, Virginia. More than 600 members attended, many for the first time. Conference sessions focused on how medical writers and editors can communicate better in an increasingly information-rich but occasionally knowledge-poor world society.

## Plenary Sessions

Organized and chaired by Maxine A Gere, who edits the newsletter *Tecnologica* for the BlueCross BlueShield Association, the editing-writing plenary featured two presentations related to the internationalization of English-language biomedical writing. Both presentations were based on newly gathered data.

The first speaker, Cheryl Iverson, managing editor of the American Medical Association *Archives Journals*, spoke about "US Editors' Attitude Toward Manuscript Submissions from Other Countries". Sharing information she had recently gathered from editors of various US medical journals, Iverson noted a general increase in manuscript submissions from outside the United States. She listed actions that journals had taken to increase international submissions, discussed other factors that might have contributed to the increase, and presented possible further steps to facilitate publication of international submissions in US journals.

Walter J Pagel, director of scientific  
CHRISTINE THEISEN is a senior account executive at Matthews Media Group, Inc, and a freelance medical writer. BARBARA GASTEL also contributed to this report.

publications at the University of Texas M D Anderson Cancer Center, addressed "Cultural Problems of Nonnative Authors That May Not Be Related to Language". Pagel's presentation drew on information obtained from M D Anderson faculty and trainees with native languages other than English. He summarized their comments, including suggestions to help the editorial office at M D Anderson serve nonnative speakers better. Pagel closed by recommending that English language skills be considered more fully when postdoctoral fellows from other countries are invited to

*... medical communicators,  
by being diligent and  
precise, could help avert  
accidents ...*

the United States.

Other plenary sessions included the educators session ("Charting Our Next Decade: Toward Excellence in Educating Medical Communicators"), the public relations-advertising-marketing session ("Media and Marketing: 2001 and Beyond"), the pharmaceutical session ("Registering Clinical Trials: Perspectives for Medical Writers"), and the freelance session ("Staying Afloat in a Wired World").

## General Session: Cancer Screening

In the general session, Barnett S Kramer—director of the Office of Medical Applications of Research at the National Institutes of Health, senior medical scientist in the Division of Cancer Prevention at the National Cancer Institute, and editor-in-chief of the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*—spoke about cancer screening. Kramer's presentation, titled "The Logic of Cancer Screening: The

Clash of Medical Science and Intuition", focused on the difference between what many hope that cancer screening will provide and what it does provide. Kramer noted that cancer screening has been proved to reduce morbidity and mortality associated with only a few types of cancer. Data on colon cancer screening, for example, constitute strong evidence that screening and follow-up treatment reduce colon-cancer mortality.

Another common screening test, mammography for breast cancer, has not been proved to provide a clear benefit to those who are screened, Kramer said, but it has caused an increase in the numbers of mastectomies and breast-conserving operations that are done in the United States. Because some of what was found during screening might never have progressed to full breast cancer, women might have spent more money and more time on treatment than necessary.

Kramer concluded his discussion by reminding the audience that their understanding of and communication about cancer screening will help others, including physicians, to determine whether screening is appropriate for a particular person or population.

## John P McGovern Medal Luncheon

AMWA President Lynn M Alperin presented the John P McGovern Medal to Richard I Cook, assistant professor in the Department of Anesthesia and Critical Care and director of the Cognitive Technologies Laboratory at the University of Chicago. In his presentation, "Operating at the Sharp End: Explaining Technical Work in Health Care", Cook discussed the role of human error in medical mistakes. He described complex system breakdowns (such as when an accident occurs at a hospital) as the combination of a series of small events, the prevention of any of

which would prevent the breakdown. He explained that medical communicators, by being diligent and precise, could help avert accidents “at the sharp end”.

### **Walter C Alvarez Award Luncheon**

Elmer Huerta, director of the Cancer Risk Assessment and Screening Center at Washington Cancer Institute, Washington Hospital Center, accepted the Walter C Alvarez Award with a talk on “Use of Media to Create a Cancer ‘Preventorium’”. Huerta described his groundbreaking work in the daily use of radio and television to spread the message of prevention to populations that had not previously used pre-

ventive services. He shared the idea of a preventorium, a place that healthy people visit for screening tests and health education. Huerta has already created a preventorium in Washington, DC, and shared his model as one that could be replicated on a larger scale.

### **Lillian Sablack Membership Dinner**

The annual membership dinner honored Lillian Sablack, who was retiring after nearly 30 years as AMWA executive director. AMWA President Alperin, also a long-time CSE member, moderated the program, which featured a lighthearted

musical tribute to Sablack. Performers included CSE President Tom Lang (as part of the Rejected Suitors Septet) and CSE member Flo Witte, who drew much applause for her rendition of “Annual Conference Blues”.

The conference also included 78 workshops and many special forums, breakfast roundtables, and luncheon roundtables. For information about AMWA’s 62nd annual conference, to be held 30 October–2 November 2002 in San Diego, California, visit [www.amwa.org](http://www.amwa.org).



## Contribute a Column

Science Editor welcomes contributions to the following departments:

- Net Results
- Freelance Editor
- Editing and Education
- Guest Editor
- The Lighter View

To obtain more information or propose an idea, please contact Barbara Gastel, editor, at 979-845-6887 or [b-gastel@tamu.edu](mailto:b-gastel@tamu.edu).