

AMWA Conference Features the Genetic, the International, the Literary, More

Karen Potvin Klein

“Strands of Discovery”, the 62nd annual conference of the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA), convened on 31 October-2 November 2002 in San Diego, California. The explosion of knowledge in genetics was the central theme to illustrate how new methods, new information, and new opportunities are shaping the work of medical communicators. A total of 740 registrants participated in 84 workshops (the most ever offered at an AMWA annual conference) and numerous other professional and networking activities. Here are some highlights of the jam-packed schedule.

General Session and Keynote Address

The conference hit the ground running with the 2002 keynote address by Daniel R Masys, introduced by General Session Chair Lynn Alperin. Masys’s talk, titled “Stranded in Time: Health Care Challenges of Genome-Enabled Science”, reviewed the history of the field of genetics, provided an insider’s description of the development of the Human Genome Project (in which he contributed his biomedical-informatics expertise), and walked the audience through the future in a world where one’s “personal genomics” will be a routine part of one’s medical record. But lest we forget, as Masys reminded the audience, a recent National Science Foundation poll found that 87% of US adults don’t know what a molecule is. For health-care providers no less than for medical communicators, the “art and science of organizing knowledge of health and disease”, as Masys put it, are skills more important than ever to our culture.

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Walter C Alvarez Award Luncheon

This year’s recipient of the Walter C Alvarez Award was Carol K Kasper, emeritus professor of medicine at the University of Southern California. Her topic, “Improving Medical Care Around the Globe: The Role of the Written Word”, summarized her varied experiences as a hemophilia researcher, scientific communicator, and thought leader in such international organizations as the World Federation of Hemophilia and the World Health Organization.

John P McGovern Medal Luncheon

AMWA President Helen E Hodgson opened the luncheon by presenting the President’s Award to Mary Knatterud, long active in both AMWA and CSE. Hodgson then introduced the 2002 John P McGovern Medal winner, Sherwin B Nuland, clinical professor of surgery at Yale University School of Medicine. In a thoughtful and sometimes lyrical talk titled “Writing From the Bedside”, the National Book Award-winning surgeon shared his thoughts about the importance of writing in our lives (it is “an exercise in seeking the clues of our lives”) and the creative process (which is ideally “unhampered spontaneity”). “Writing makes it possible for us to learn what we think”, said Nuland. But this need not be a solemn experience—he encouraged the audience to think of life as a bowl of cereal and of the raisins in the cereal as the “fun parts” that we should enjoy. Good advice, even for someone like me who doesn’t care for raisins.

Open Sessions

A strong feature of the AMWA annual conference continues to be the open sessions, and a total of 18 were offered at the 2002 conference. The array of topics was broad enough to truly offer something for everyone. The ever-popular “How To” approach encompassed topics as far-flung

as the teaching of writing (collaborative strategies, adult learners, and academic physicians), applications of newer media and multimedia (Web-site design for users with disabilities, medical writers’ use of personal digital assistants, and PowerPoint presentations), and creation of integrated clinical and statistical reports. Several sessions focused on subjects of emerging interest to medical writers—safety and legal issues in the workplace, communication standards for alternative medicine, and innovations in informatics. As always, career overviews were included—this year, writing for the medical-device industry, legal issues in subcontracting freelance medical writers, and approaches to creating medical education and advertising materials—as well as the annual paper presentation session, where six papers were given.

Two AMWA task force reports were also included among the open sessions. Results of the recent membership salary survey—the first since 1994—were presented by CSE members Flo Witte and Tinker Gray. Later in the meeting, MaryAnn Foote (moderator), Cindy W Hamilton, and Jane Saiers described the findings of the Task Force on the Contribution of Medical Writers to Scientific Publications.

And More

The popular breakfast roundtables—as well as social events, exercise sessions (even water aerobics in this southern California setting), and a tempting array of local tours—provided more informal opportunities to learn, swap information, and get to know colleagues. More of the same, and another challenging palette of educational opportunities, will doubtless be part of the next annual conference, on 18-20 September 2003 (take note—a month earlier than usual) in Miami. For more information on this event, visit www.amwa.org. 