

# Enriching Biomedical Communications: AMWA's 2003 Annual Conference

**Karen Potvin Klein**

The 2003 annual conference of the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) returned to Miami, and a record number of attendees (771) participated in a record number of workshops (84), not to mention poster presentations, creative readings, 65 breakfast roundtables, 24 Open Sessions, a mentor-mentee reception, and, in the small interstices of free time, tours of enticing South Florida attractions.

The meeting's keynote address, "The New Wonderful World of Longevity", was given by Robert Butler, first director of the National Institute on Aging and founder of the International Longevity Center in New York. Butler's topic was appropriate not only for Miami, with its large population of retirees, but also for AMWA—as he reminded us, longevity is "not a privilege for a few, but an expectation for many". But what will longevity be like in the 21st century? Butler cited an estimate that by mid century, 14 million people may have Alzheimer's disease. Yet he warned the audience about the many emerging threats to longevity: obesity and related diseases, such as diabetes, atherosclerosis, and stroke; and new infectious diseases, such as HIV/AIDS and SARS.

If, as Butler commented, "duration of health and vitality are genetic legacies from our ancient ancestors", the burgeoning field of genomics seems well poised to elucidate how healthy longevity can be achieved. We still have a lot to learn about healthy aging. There are only five departments of geriatrics in US medical schools, and clinical trials still lack adequate numbers of older participants and often fail to address their common health

problems (such as drug-drug interactions). In developing countries, "shortevity" (as Butler coined it) is more the order of the day, as AIDS, drug-resistant tuberculosis, and other deadly diseases reduce average life span far below that of the United States. Butler ended his talk by identifying how increasing longevity challenges our society. For example, should the retirement age be changed as more Americans are able to work longer? How would such a change affect our Social Security and pension systems?

It would have taken more than an East Coast hurricane to deter a record number of AMWA members from attending the 2003 conference, but the bad weather did prevent the McGovern Award winner—the physician, essayist, and journalist Jerome Groopman—from leaving Boston to receive the award. He was kind enough to videotape a brief talk that did make it to Miami and thus was still able to share his insights into writing and the medical profession. Groopman said that those who work in medical writing and editing "are in a position to look at life's mysteries . . . and the narrative of illness." He related how his own writing was focused on the "search for the meaning of life". He told a vivid anecdote about his early attempts to publish his work and how he found it difficult to square his search for meaning with preconceptions that what people want to read about is a pleasanter, less complex, and ultimately less real version of real life. Fortunately for readers, Groopman persevered. At the time of the meeting, his next book, *The Anatomy of Hope*, was scheduled to appear in January 2004. Its theme is the necessity of hope for those who endure illness; Groopman called it "an essential medicine, but fragile. . . . Hope is at the core of medicine, and at the core of experience of illness." As in previous writings, his patients' experience forms the core of what he shares with the reader. Groopman closed by characterizing writing

as "a great gift" and as the best way to learn about the world around us. Medical writers, he said, write about something "sacred—the art of healing". Thus, medical writing is "a calling, not just a job".

The Walter C. Alvarez Award winners for 2003 were the husband-wife team of Joe Graedon and Terry Graedon, hosts of the National Public Radio show "The People's Pharmacy" (then in its 25th year) and nationwide syndicated columnists. Their talk was titled "Communicating About Controversies—Distinguishing Experts and Visionaries from Kooks". This was not the usual behind-a-podium-with-slides presentation. Instead, the Graedons jumped to their feet, each with a cordless microphone in hand, and led a freewheeling, point-counterpoint discussion. The emphasis was on topics of concern to everyone that have recently been in the news—diet and nutrition and the use of postmenopausal hormone therapy. Although always entertaining, the Graedons emphasized a clear-headed approach to interpreting medical news. For example, they pointed out that there is no *Consumer Reports* for common drugs (although perhaps their work helps to make up for this deficiency!), and head-to-head studies of one drug vs another are rare—even though choices between competing drugs are daily decisions for patients and clinicians alike. They commented on the phenomenon of "eminence-based"—not "evidence-based"—medicine in the medical literature and clinical practice. "Caveat emptor", or perhaps "caveat patient", is the Graedons' message to their listeners and readers. Finally, the Graedons achieved what may be a first in AMWA history: after their talk, they both joined AMWA, and Joe Graedon agreed to be a workshop leader in 2004!

This year's Harold Swanberg Distinguished Service Award was presented to Susan Eastwood for her many contributions to medical communication.

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Her talk was titled “The Editor’s Role in Responsible Conduct (and Reporting) of Research”. Eastwood traced the history of author’s editors—a role fulfilled by scribes in ancient cultures—as bulwarks of literacy and reinforcers of ethical ideas. Scribes were honored in ancient Indian, Mayan, Assyrian, and Mesopotamian cultures. Some, such as the Roman Tacitus, became noted historians. But as literacy increased, the role of the scribe became relegated to a transcriptionist. It is important, though, that the concept of the value of accuracy remained. Bringing the perspective to the present, Eastwood commented on the importance of the author’s editor as a teacher of responsible conduct of research, especially since such instruction was mandated by the National Institutes of Health for research or training programs that

receive federal funding. Concurrently, and disturbingly, Eastwood traced the demise of writing groups in many pharmaceutical companies because of acquisitions, mergers, and economic pressures. Addressing us modern-day “research communication specialists”, she issued a call to action to the audience: be a scribe in the ancient sense by joining part of the research team. She noted how teaching others what we know teaches us more about science and its conduct. Eastwood concluded by stating that the value of the author’s editor is reinforced when that person anticipates issues, brings solutions to the table, volunteers to teach, or mentors trainees—in short, becomes a member of the research team, no mere “transcriptionist”.

Space does not permit a more in-depth description of the many valuable educa-

tional and networking opportunities that an AMWA annual conference always provides. But for those who cannot attend conference workshops, AMWA offers something new: its first distance-learning module, “Basic Grammar for Biomedical Communicators”, created by Flo Witte, winner of a Golden Apple Award for teaching excellence and AMWA’s president for 2003-2004. The CD and workbook were previewed in Miami, and buyers began lining up right from the start. Purchasers can earn workshop credit for successfully completing the module. For more information about this new product, go to the AMWA Web site at [www.amwa.org](http://www.amwa.org). And plan ahead—reserve the dates of 21-23 October for the 2004 AMWA annual conference in St. Louis! 