

“Gateway to Knowledge”: AMWA’s 64th Annual Conference

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In sight of the shiny silver arch that dominates the St Louis riverfront, more than 800 attendees participated in the 64th annual conference of the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) on 21-23 October 2004. For biomedical communicators, the record-setting 93 workshops available for professional education may have been just as exciting as the Cardinals’ winning the National League pennant a few blocks away. Regardless, it was a high-energy, information-packed conference.

Robert Webster, an internationally known expert on the influenza virus, delivered a riveting (and perhaps frightening) keynote address. Webster presented an overview of the natural history, epidemiology, and characteristics of influenza—its leapfrogging from species to species, its remarkable facility at mutation, and its potentially deadly implications for its ovine and human hosts. He shared news regarding the expansion of the host range that had not been announced yet by the World Health Organization. He also

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gave some recommendations for treating influenza. Finally, Webster issued a call to action for biomedical communicators to help health officials and other decision-makers address the “worldwide crisis” in influenza-vaccine development, production, and deployment.

Another high point of the meeting was the lyrical talk by M Therese Southgate, senior contributing editor of *JAMA*, at the McGovern Medal Award luncheon. This year’s McGovern Medal winner, Cheryl Iverson (managing editor and director of copyediting of the *Archives* Journals of the American Medical Association), could not attend the luncheon, and Southgate spoke in her place. Southgate, who selects the artwork for each week’s cover of *JAMA*, asked Iverson, her long-time friend and colleague, to name her top 10 covers of *JAMA* and to explain why she chose them. The beautiful artwork displayed and the conversation between Southgate and Iverson as excerpted in Southgate’s remarks were thought-provoking, sometimes witty, and moving.

Those who have read Loretta LaRoche’s syndicated columns or seen her PBS television specials know how funny she is and how true her insights can be about stress, coping, and finding what’s important in one’s life. Illness prevented LaRoche, this year’s Alvarez Award recipient, from com-

ing to St Louis in person, but she did the next best thing: she sent a video of one of her television specials. Few at the Alvarez Award luncheon could stop chortling, chuckling, or guffawing. The importance of keeping one’s life from becoming a “stress rehearsal” (as LaRoche says) was a valuable message to remember.

“They don’t make them like they used to” could have been the introduction for Guy Whitehead, recipient of the Harold Swanberg Distinguished Service Award. Whitehead spent his entire career in medical editing at Mayo Clinic, and his gentle vignettes about his early days of training in Rochester and his mentors and co-workers there were snapshots of a kinder and perhaps gentler era.

The conference also included 23 open sessions and 64 breakfast roundtables, as well as the 93 workshops. As in the past, registrants packed the open session on the results of the latest AMWA salary survey. Poster presentations, exhibits, creative readings, and tours rounded out the conference offerings.

The next AMWA annual conference will be on 29 September-1 October 2005 in Pittsburgh. For information about it, please watch the AMWA Web site, www.amwa.org. 