

# “Building Skills, Bridging Ideas”: AMWA’s 65th Annual Conference

### Karen Potvin Klein

Only Venice has more city bridges than Pittsburgh (who knew?), and that fact helped shape the theme of the 65th annual conference of the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA). The “new” Pittsburgh, a gleaming cityscape with a vibrant cultural life, was host to more than 800 AMWA members from 29 September to 1 October 2005.

The conference got off to a rousing start with the keynote lecture by Bernard Fisher, of the University of Pittsburgh, titled “47 Years of Breast Cancer Research and Treatment: Some Extraordinary Highlights of My Journey”. He provided insights into his remarkable career as a physician and researcher and candidly shared some of the challenges he has encountered. Fisher is best known for his leadership of the National Surgical Adjuvant Breast and Bowel Project (NSABP) and for his lifesaving research into the value of lumpectomy and radiation to treat women with breast cancer. He emphasized that only the rigor of well-designed clinical trials can provide valid, credible information for physicians and their patients.

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Danielle Ofri, the McGovern Medal recipient for 2005, links the worlds of narrative and healing in her work as a creative writer, editor of the *Bellevue Literary Review*, and a physician. Poetry, she said, should be

important to health-care providers because they must interpret patients’ metaphors and understand their narratives. “Storytelling translates medical practice into healing”, Ofri commented. Medical editors often deal only with the technical aspects of language, and this talk was a cogent reminder of the beauty of language.

The 2005 Alvarez Award winner, Ruth Murphey Parker, of Emory University, skillfully incorporated her videotaped encounters with real patients into her talk, “Health Literacy: Can We Cure the Confusion?” Parker stated that 90 million Americans have trouble understanding health information. Indeed, she said, “these are people who have trouble following a bus schedule.” Health literacy is the key to reducing both health costs and health disparities, so the stakes are high. Medical communicators are a vital part of the societal groups that need to take



**Bernard Fisher**

responsibility for improving health literacy, she stressed.

As always, the AMWA workshops, 80-strong this year, provided numerous chances for professional development through the core curriculum, the advanced curriculum, and noncredit offerings. Particularly valuable components of this year’s program were the 33 open sessions, which covered a wide variety of subjects, such as regulatory issues, effective teaching of technical writing, Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) requirements, issues in the news such as bioterrorism and open access, and the always-popular “how to” sessions.

A new session, “Coffee and Dessert Klatches”, gave attendees an opportunity to meet and mingle while discussing topics on the lighter side of professional life. More than 60 breakfast roundtables were the place for early-morning conversations about how to do your job better—or maybe how to change your job altogether. Creative readings, poster presentations, exhibits, chapter meet-and-greets, and tours rounded out the offerings.

Albuquerque is the venue for the 2006 annual conference, to be held 26-28 October. Go to the AMWA Web site, [www.amwa.org](http://www.amwa.org), for details. 