

# “Reaching New Heights”: AMWA’s 66th Annual Conference

**Karen Potvin Klein**

The sunny city of Albuquerque was the venue for the 66th annual conference of the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA), held 26-28 October 2006. It was a conference of firsts for AMWA: the first conference with more than 1000 attendees and the first time the event was held in a convention center. As a result, there was more of everything an AMWA meeting usually offers—workshops, open sessions, other educational opportunities, and networking.

The keynote lecture was given by Dale Alverson, a University of New Mexico physician who gave the audience a global glimpse into the many ways in which telemedicine is being used today. Rural and remote areas worldwide increasingly use videophone, satellite, or Internet connections to train care providers and help patients get better care. As Alverson noted, most health issues are global, so the flow of information should not stop at a nation’s borders. Disasters like Hurricane Katrina show even more ways that health care and technology could work together. Despite such issues as patient safety and concerns about confidentiality, telemedicine shows promise as a more collaborative way to teach and administer medical care that respects the diversity of cultures, addresses challenges in access to health care, and still has a human touch—our “need to create trust in each other”, in Alverson’s words.

The McGovern Medal recipient for

---

KAREN POTVIN KLEIN, of Wake Forest University Health Sciences, is the workshop coordinator for the 2007 AMWA conference.

2006, A John Rush Jr is a psychiatrist whose interest in what makes people tick has fueled a distinguished career in clinical investigation. Perhaps not surprisingly, his talk focused on how his experiences helped to shape his career of inquiry into how the human mind works. As a faculty member at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas, Rush has seen firsthand the toll that psychiatric illness can take, and his compassion for the patients and their families has placed him in the center of many important research initiatives to improve mental health. A prolific contributor to the medical literature himself, Rush revealed his natural proclivity for, and appreciation of, the art and craft of medical writing as an important form of human expression.

The 2006 Alvarez Award winner, Neil Shulman, avoids taking life too seriously, but that doesn’t mean that his message isn’t important. Shulman is the Emory University faculty member whose book was the basis for the movie *Doc Hollywood*. He is, no doubt, the only AMWA speaker who appeared in a clown wig and red rubber nose for his talk—all to emphasize that simplifying your message without condescending, as we strive to do with children, could be more common in medical communication. One of Shulman’s stress-reducing tips to the audience: spend more time with the “PPC” (“Pre-Puberty Club”), which he himself is doing in developing new children’s books and videos as cost-effective ways to teach medical literacy at an early age.

Also a colorful contributor to the conference was Dale Hammerschmidt, the 2006 winner of the Harold Swan-berg

Distinguished Service Award. Hammerschmidt was the long-time editor of the *Journal of Laboratory and Clinical Medicine*, and in that capacity he made notable contributions in raising awareness of—and developing better methods to detect—fraud in peer-reviewed publications. His anecdotes of cases from his journal experience illustrated the need for shared responsibilities among reviewers, editors, and readers and how a complex system—with fallible human beings at its core—will always have challenges in how it addresses deliberate non-truth-telling.

As always, the AMWA workshops, 95 strong at the 2006 annual conference, provided numerous chances for professional development in the core curricula, the advanced curriculum, and noncredit offerings. In addition, the 37 open sessions ran the gamut from complementary medicine, forensic science, and brain imaging to copyright rules, what employers want in a freelance, and direct-to-consumer advertising.

More than 60 breakfast roundtables started the day with conversations on business tips, creative ways to solve problems, “how-to” advice, and more. Creative readings, a record number of poster presentations, an expanded exhibitor area, chapter meet-and-greets, the “Conference Coach Connection” for first-time attendees, “Coffee and Dessert Klatches” for informal evening chats, and tours rounded out the offerings.

Atlanta is the site of the next annual conference, to be held 11-13 October 2007. Go to the AMWA Web site, [www.amwa.org](http://www.amwa.org), for details. 