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“Celebration of Writing in Science and Medicine” at M D Anderson

“Writing is not an amusing occupation. It is a combination of ditch-digging, mountain-climbing, treadmill, and childbirth. Writing may be interesting, absorbing, exhilarating, racking, relieving. But amusing? Never!” So wrote Edna Ferber. To celebrate this formidable task and inspire those who undertake it, M D Anderson Cancer Center’s departments of Faculty Development and Scientific Publications cosponsored a week-long symposium 27 November-1 December 2006, examining writing in many forms—scientific, expository, and creative.

Keynote speakers included Frank Davidoff, former editor of *Annals of Internal Medicine*, and James Olson, a Pulitzer Prize–nominated historian writing a history of M D Anderson Cancer Center. Davidoff spoke on “Making Order Out of Chaos: The Writer’s Task”. Describing the evolution of two of his own recent articles, “Homeless” and “Plan B and the Politics of Doubt” (cowritten with James Trussell), he explored how the act of writing a coherent text helps writers to structure their own ideas and experiences, creating powerful narratives to explain our world and capture the audience’s imagination. Davidoff illustrated the process by which writers must shape nonlinear events and knowledge into a linear written form with the particularly compelling story of his mother’s end-of-life struggle with Cotard syndrome, a delusional state that can be caused by the trauma of becoming homeless—literally or figuratively. The act of writing the article, Davidoff explained, helped him to make sense of the chaos he had experienced.

The role of storytelling in communicating science and medicine was also featured in Olson’s address, “Putting a Face on M D Anderson’s History”. Olson shared highlights of the research he has done, focusing on the human dimension of the development of cancer treatment and research. He related fascinating stories about the process of M D Anderson’s transition to racial integration for patients and employees in the 1960s, including a recounting of how



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former Alabama governor and noted segregationist George Wallace’s wife, Lurleen, was steadfastly cared for by the first black nursing supervisor at Anderson. Other stories included how the nursing profession was elevated when the director of nursing acquired the authority to hire and fire nurses and the struggle of the director of volunteers to convince the medical leadership that matching breast-cancer patients with breast-cancer survivors would benefit both groups.

Various technical workshops were offered during the week. For scientific-writing skills, the Department of Scientific Publications offered a 1-hour overview of the structure of the research article based on the IMRAD (introduction, methods, results, and discussion) format. A faculty panel of career-development–award recipients provided advice on preparing to write the proposal for a National Institutes of Health or privately funded career-development award and was followed by a 2-hour seminar on the mechanics of writing grant proposals, including the specific aims, background and significance, preliminary studies, and research design sections. Staff of the Research Medical Library outlined how scientific writers can take advantage of new citation-tracking and search tools.

Joan Bolker—clinical psychologist and a noted writing coach of researchers at Harvard, University of Massachusetts, Wellesley, and Brandeis—spoke on writer’s block and shared strategies for breaking through it. She began the workshop with

an exercise in free writing, in which participants write anything and everything that comes to mind for 5 minutes without stopping or editing. She then asked participants to select one or two thoughts that they would continue to develop the next time they wrote. Bolker's recommendations to blocked writers included committing oneself to writing something—anything—for at least 10 minutes a day, lowering one's standards at the beginning of the writing process and worrying about improving the writing later, and writing quick notes to oneself at the end of writing sessions as prompts for where to begin the next time. She also endorsed B F Skinner's approach of writing to discover what you have to say, not to express what you already know.

The link between perfectionism, prevalent in the medical and research fields, and procrastination was discussed by Thelma Jean Goodrich, associate professor of behavioral science at M D Anderson. On the basis of her counseling work with faculty, she identified several traps that keep writers from getting started, such as "putting the cart before the horse" (putting off writing until one is motivated, rather than just jumping in and letting the process generate motivation), the "mastery model" ("if writing's not easy for me, then I must not be cut out for it"), and not recognizing the difference between perfection (leading to "endless torment") and excellence (leading to happiness).

Susan Wood, poet and professor of English at Rice University, explored the role of creativity not only in poetry and literature but in expository writing. The theme of "artful storytelling" stood out once again as Wood described how she teaches "Literature in Medicine" at Rice. She encouraged writers to be authentic in their writing, expressing what they mean and what is important to them, and not to stifle creativity by worrying too much about offending others. Some of the techniques she shared for overcoming writer's block were to set aside a special time and place to write, to use an established format as a model (in poetry, for example, one could try haiku, ballads, or limericks), and, of course, to practice consistently.

Judging from the high attendance and the comments received, the symposium was just what the doctors ordered, and plans are under way to make it an annual event.

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