

“A Legacy of Leadership”: AMWA’s 67th Annual Conference

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The 67th Annual Conference of the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA), held 11-13 October 2007 in Atlanta, celebrated “a legacy of leadership” with a nod to the group’s long history of educating medical writers and editors and a look ahead to a strong vision for the future of medical communication.

The keynote lecture, titled “Leaders in Medical Education: Viewpoints and Visions”, was held in town-hall style and featured Eve J Higginbotham, dean and senior vice president for academic affairs at the Morehouse School of Medicine, and J William (Bill) Eley, executive associate dean for medical education and student affairs at the Emory University School of Medicine.

Moderated by Nancy Albritton, a senior editor at *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the discussion covered an array of issues, from the state of medical education to the insurance industry’s fee structure to the doctor-patient relationship. Eley bemoaned how traditionally medical schools have taken students who were excellent communicators when they arrived and too often turned them virtually incoherent by the time they graduated. That’s now changing, he said, as students are increasingly expected to excel as communicators, in writing and orally. Emory and Morehouse are among the medical schools revamping their curricula to emphasize strong communication skills early on and to expose future physicians to a blend of bench and

bedside experiences from the moment they set foot on campus.

The McGovern Medal recipient for 2007 was Julie L. Gerberding, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Gerberding was in Africa meeting with government leaders and physicians on AIDS issues at the time, so Steven L. Solomon, director of CDC’s Coordinating Center for Health Information and Service, accepted the award on her behalf and spoke to attendees about communicating science in a world where information is perpetual, panglobal, participatory, personalized, and portable.

“We live in a 24-7 sound-bite world,” Solomon said, citing the proliferation of handhelds, wireless communication, RSS feeds, podcasts, and other mobile applications for influencing health, disease management, risk communication, and persuasive messaging in relation to health behaviors. “Our ability to manage information—and I don’t mean to distribute information, but to give credible information—is a challenge on a daily basis.” That, he said, is more important than ever in light of the nation’s rapidly aging population and lifestyle excesses that are leading to serious health burdens. Accordingly, CDC has begun to explore new ways of getting out the word, including the use of social media. For example, the agency has created Hygeia Philo, an avatar in the virtual world known as “Second Life”, who helps to spread positive health messages.

The 2007 Alvarez Award winner, Jeffrey P Koplan, echoed the theme of capitalizing on sound communication principles to address the health issues threatening all nations, big and small, rich and poor. In a talk titled “Why Global Health?”, Koplan, vice president for academic health affairs at

Emory’s Woodruff Health Sciences Center, discussed how working with people around the world is yielding solutions to common health problems.

Few know more about the challenges and opportunities associated with global health than Elliott Churchill, the 2007 winner of the Harold Swanberg Distinguished Service Award. Churchill, a former senior communication officer in CDC’s Division of International Health, delivered a moving acceptance speech reflecting on her life as a medical writer, editor, and educator whose travels have taken her to nearly 100 countries.

As usual, the conference included dozens of workshops, breakfast roundtables, poster presentations, exhibits, creative readings, chapter meet-and-greets, evening coffee klatches, and open sessions on an array of topics—from Civil War medicine to stem-cell research. But the meeting’s 1000 or so attendees also had novel offerings to consider, including AMWA’s latest certificate track, the Curriculum in Science Fundamentals. The program is aimed at writers with a liberal arts degree and a thirst for scientific information and seasoned writers who have earned AMWA’s core and advanced certificates and are looking for something new. The workshops are designed to orient participants to particular scientific fields and to provide a foundation for further study. AMWA also unveiled its third self-study module, *Sentence Structure and Patterns*, the latest in a series that includes *Basic Grammar and Usage* and *Punctuation for Clarity and Style*.

Louisville will play host to the next annual conference, to be held 23-25 October 2008. For more information, visit the AMWA Web site, www.amwa.org. We hope to see you there! 

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