

Mary E Knatterud: A Poetic Medical Editor

What do writing poems and editing journal articles have in common? Here's a response from a poetic medical editor: "When writing poems, one has to economize words, much the same as when one is editing journal articles."

The above answer is from Mary E Knatterud, a medical editor who recently moved from the University of Minnesota to a telecommuting position at the University of Arizona. Her poetic activity resembles a characteristic of water that I learned in high school: Water fills every available space when given the chance. Knatterud maintains that she is not "a tenure-track expert" on poems. "I write poems for pleasure. I read poems more than I write them," she says. Her poetic involvement has contributed to CSE and other organizations.

The Path and Life of a Medical Editor

It appears that Knatterud was born with a pen in her hand—she has loved writing from an early age. In 1973, when she was in her late teens, her hobby led to recognition when she won first place in an essay contest for Americans of Norwegian heritage. "It was the first time I got rewarded for my writing skills," she says.

In 1974, Knatterud graduated *summa cum laude* from Concordia College, Moorhead, Minnesota, with a BA in English and Spanish. She earned an MA in 1979 and a PhD in 1997, both in English from the University of Minnesota.

While working on her PhD, Knatterud taught composition at the University of Minnesota for 4 years. She emphasizes that nothing in her professional background prepared her more thoroughly for the rigors of being an editor than her years of teaching college composition. She enjoyed some part-time jobs in editing, both at the University of Minnesota (working on a School of Dentistry manual) and for the state of Minnesota (at the State Council for the Handicapped and at the State Planning Agency).

How did Knatterud become a *medical* editor? "In my senior year in high school, I wanted to be a pediatrician and interacted



with a local family physician as part of our career day," she says. While in high school, she was a volunteer at a local hospital. However, her greatest strength is editing. "My main professional attribute is a pair of conscientious, language-oriented eyes that can be mobilized for any field's writers," she says. "Medicine has always been an interest."

From 1981 to 1986, Knatterud was college bulletin editor and newsletter writer at the University of Minnesota Publications Center. From 1987 until late September 2008, she worked at the University of Minnesota Department of Surgery, where she rose to become associate professor and senior research associate. Her work consisted mainly of editing journal articles that surgeons had drafted. "I was involved in coming out with scores of scientific articles, including second and third drafts, annually," she says. Being able to help surgeons tell a better story to their audience appealed to her because she enjoys translating jargon so that people can understand it.

However, Knatterud's work at the University of Minnesota included more than editing journal articles. She recalls a time when the university was caught in a debate as to whether apostrophes should be introduced in names of associations. For instance, should the American Medical Writers Association be the American Medical Writers' Association? In the midst of the controversy, Knatterud wrote in *The Minnesota Daily*, the university's newspa-

Other Than Editing

continued

per, an article titled “The Academic Walk of Fame: Much ado about an apostrophe”, arguing for the current trend of not using the apostrophe. The next day, one of her fellow editors remarked: “Well said, succinctly clear.” The matter was laid to rest.

Knatterud was also involved in editing the Department of Surgery newsletter, *The Cutting Edge*, and writing and editing patient-information leaflets.

One might think that having worked with surgeons for some 21 years, Knatterud might consider surgery to be one of her disciplines. She strongly disagrees. “I am first and foremost a medical editor. I am not an MD or a surgeon, even though I know a lot about medical vocabulary and related language-oriented issues. My arts background makes it easy to relate with people with more empathy,” she explains.

Despite all her successes, Knatterud has had her share of challenges. For example, after she has worked very hard to edit them, some of the journal articles get rejected. But instead of becoming morose afterwards, she sees light at the end of the tunnel.

“Maybe the journal was not ready for the article yet, or it simply was not a fit,” she says. “You can do your best in an assignment, but you must learn to deal with rejection,” she advises fellow and future science editors.

Knatterud’s “Universe is made up of words, not atoms”

Despite Knatterud’s employment as a medical editor, her love for poems has not been forgotten. In 1997, she participated in a poetry contest with the poem “Monozygotic Miracles”. Although she did not win the contest, the poem was featured in a booklet, *A Word Celebration of Life*, published as part of the 1997 poetry celebration at the University of Minnesota Academic Health Center.

Knatterud’s most memorable poetic moment was in 2005 when an uncle dear to her “abruptly became gravely ill, underwent daunting surgery, went into and out of a tortuous coma, made an amazing comeback, insisted on being discharged

A Poem by Mary E Knatterud

PREEMPTIVE, RIGHT AND WRONG
On the invasion of abdomens and Iraq

A preemptive (kidney) transplant —
a renewing term of joy
(where even the donors are well and alive) —
jumps ahead
to the good part, the lifesaving operation,
before dialysis
has even a fleeting chance
to wither, and gouge health from, tethered patients;
it preempts a temporary, hopeless fix and
skips beyond to the
gift of life.

A preemptive (killing) war —
a revolting term, a ploy
(where sadly cadavers and savagery thrive) —
jerks away
the good part, the lifesaving option
before diplomacy
has even a bleating chance
to wise up, and give heft to, tattered patience;
it preempts a tantalizing, hopeful pax and
slams headlong to the
gore of death.

Support our renal patients,
and their passionate surgeons-in-chief,
with a preemptive transplant.
Support our run-thin troops,
not their preening commander-in-chief,
with a preemptive peace.

Dialyze? only if a graft just can’t be found.
Die for lies? only if graft and cant abound.

not to an assisted-living facility but to his own normal-living apartment, and then abruptly died, all in the space of 6 weeks, at the admittedly not young but adamantly not elderly age of 75.” This is part of the abstract accompanying a poem titled “We WERE There” and published in *Annals of Emergency Medicine*. She dedicated the poem to the memory of her uncle. “The poem helped heal the agony in my life incited by the incident,” she says.

Knatterud, who first joined the Council in the 1980s, is not a stranger to readers of *Science Editor*. In 2001 and 2004, she contributed columns titled “Tilting Against Windy Suffixes” and “Call Me Ms: A Word Doctor’s Titular Musings”, respectively. In 2006, she sent an e-mail to the editor of *Science Editor*: “Is *Science Editor* ever interested in poems?” The e-mail led to her becoming the founding editor of *Peer-Renewed*, the poetry column in *Science*

Editor. The column has been appearing three times a year since its debut in the July–August 2006 issue. Knatterud’s poem “Telling the Family: Pre- and Postop” was the first to be featured. Poems by others have followed.

Knatterud’s interest in poetry also has enhanced annual meetings of the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA). There, she led discussions of Emily Dickinson’s and Eugene Field’s poetry and a session titled “Scientifically or Medically Oriented Poems”.

In 2000, Knatterud, who has been a member of AMWA since 1988, became a fellow of AMWA. In 2002, she received AMWA’s President’s Award, which is “given to a member who has served with distinction and devotion for at least ten years at the local or national level, or both, and who has not served on the Executive Committee”.

Knatterud is also active in the Conference on College Composition and Communication (4Cs), a division of the National Council of Teachers of English. She participates in the medical rhetoricians special-interest group.

Knatterud has two favorite quotes from award-winning poets. The first is by Muriel Rukeyser: “The universe is made up of stories, not of atoms.” The second is by Mary Oliver: “Pay attention. Be astonished. Talk

about it.” Knatterud believes that Oliver’s quote sounds simple but it is very challenging. “How can one pay attention, be astonished, and talk about something?” she asks. “It calls for one who is knowledgeable about his or her environment and who is skillful in delivering the message.”

Enjoying the Flexibility of Life

Knatterud is married to Jim Johnson, a sales manager in an automotive recycling corporation. Her twin sons are in their twenties and her daughter is a teenager. The sons, although excellent writers, appear not to have acquired editing genes from their mom: “We don’t want to become editors,” they once told her. True to their resolve, one is a financial analyst, and the other works with a medical mission in Bolivia. However, the teenaged daughter likes writing and might well wear her mother’s editorial and poetic shoes.

Knatterud’s commitment to family has influenced her career path. Early in her career, she worked briefly outside academe. She moved to an academic medical editing job because of the flexibility, autonomy, and creativity it offered her. “I love academe because your work is often able to make a difference in a subject matter that really matters,” she adds.

What prompted Knatterud to move from a position at the University of Minnesota

to one at the University of Arizona? She says the opportunity to work full-time at home for the latter was a crucial factor. “I loved working with the wonderful faculty of the University of Minnesota but am thrilled with this heady new challenge,” she says. Knatterud will make periodic trips to the University of Arizona.

Throughout Knatterud’s professional life, flexibility in handling multiple tasks has been a passion. For instance, because an editing job with a pharmaceutical company lacked flexibility, she did not take it despite the higher salary. Also, she chose to become the president of a regional chapter of AMWA rather than seek a national office. “The flexibility of handling regional matters made me have more time for my family and numerous writing assignments,” she says.

Living with Poems

Knatterud says reading and writing poems help her in medical editing. It appears she is not prepared to pursue poetry professionally. “I just love writing and reading poems, sending them to friends, and talking about them,” she says.

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