

Trudy L. Knight

31st October, 2015

Essay submitted for consideration for the Geoff Hall Scholarship 2015

Are medical writers scientists ?

My immediate response to this question is ‘yes – of course medical writers are scientists !’
But are they really ? I am possibly biased; like most medical writers I have been a scientist since graduating, and now embarking on medical writing, I wish to keep my scientist status. So is this desire clouding my perspective ?

Let’s investigate the question from different viewpoints, and start by briefly introducing medical writing. The pharmaceutical industry, clinical research organisations, government, health services and academia all depend upon medical writing as a key communication link. The range of documents is immense, and their target audiences are diverse, ranging from scientists and regulators, to medical professionals and the public. In summary, medical writing is essential and is diverse with regards to both document type and readership. Let us dissect the term ‘medical writing’, and consider, what is ‘writing’ ?

Writing is a form of communication; it requires an abundance of skills, as well as a degree of flair, to deliver a clear message. Clarity in communication is achieved by organisation of the content and careful construction of the text. The skilled writer (or ‘wordsmith’) considers the reader’s perspective, and success lies in the wise choice of words to unobtrusively convey the message. Simplicity is the key to clarity, but it is not easy to achieve. The wordsmith is well versed in the relentless editing, culling, reviewing, rearranging, recommencing, vocalising, and checking, until finally, the desired concise message emerges. Such honed text has an easy spontaneity, which is a joy to read, and its message is undisputable. Perfection is the result of great endeavour, as is common to all forms of art, for the work of a skilled writer is indeed an art. If writing is an art, then is medical writing also an art ?

Clarity in communication is important in all writing, but is unquestionably paramount in medical writing. Both the audiences and the nature of medical documents are diverse. Consequently, the fine skills of the wordsmith are crucial, to effectively engage and clearly communicate with different readers. Thus the constructive aspect of medical writing is an art, in similarity with other types of writing. However, clarity in writing also depends upon organisation and delivery of the content. The content of medical writing is based on complex science, and scientists and medical professionals are

among its target audience. These aspects prevent classifying medical writing, in its entirety, as an art. So, is medical writing a science ?

The fruition of science depends upon communication by writing. Science and writing are entwined and cannot be separated without impeding scientific progress. Medical writing enables scientific progress by providing vital communications, both within and between teams of scientific researchers, assessors, clinical professionals and the public. The nature and form of the information communicated depends upon its purpose and target audience, but it is always based on complex science. Effective medical writing therefore requires application of the science, in a manner appropriate for each communication. This is not a wordsmith's task. This work is fundamentally a science, and is the task of the medical writer. So are medical writers scientists ?

Medical writers carry significant scientific and ethical responsibilities, for their communications are key in the advancement of global human health. They not only have biological scientific knowledge and expertise, but also understanding of its application to medicine and the relevant specialities (for example, pharmacology and pharmacokinetics). They are also adept in scientific methodologies, such as statistical analyses and epidemiological methods. Thus medical writers extrapolate and interpret data, to communicate effectively and maximise the reader's understanding. Enthusiasm is a universal feature of medical writers, and they interact easily across the two multidisciplinary spheres of science and medicine. Clearly, the knowledge and roles of the medical writer are indicative of scientist status, and they exceed the definition of a scientist as 'a person who is studying or has expert knowledge of one or more of the natural or physical sciences' (Oxford Dictionary, 2015).

In conclusion, medical writers possess the fine skills of the wordsmith. However, it is their expert scientific knowledge, their active role in progressing science to medical advancement, the significant responsibilities they hold, and their passion for medical science, which sets them apart from other writers. Medical writers are most definitely scientists !