



Voices of Experience

By Heather Haley, MS

Eli Lilly Canada Inc.

➤ Interviewee: Eve Wilson, PhD

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AMWA: What is your education and work background?

Eve: I received my undergraduate degree in microbiology at Texas A&M (1983) and later a PhD in microbiology from The University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston, TX (1988). I came to the east coast to accept a Research Associateship from the National Research Council and spent 2

years on that stipend doing work at the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Center for Biologics Research (in immunology/diabetes). During that time, I had decided to leave research and was looking around for a career I could enjoy and was also qualified for. Science writing/medical writing seemed the best fit.

AMWA: How long have you worked in medical writing?

Eve: I took my first medical writing job in 1990 and worked mostly as a medical writer for the next 14 years. In 1997, I took a job with INNOVIA Education Institute (then Medicalliance) as a medical writer. INNOVIA is a medical education company that has accreditation from the Accreditation Council for Continuing Medical Education (ACCME) to provide continuing medical education (CME) for physicians. I was a writer here for 7 years. Last year, I accepted a promotion to a management-level position, my first.

AMWA: What does providing CME to physicians mean? What types of writing are involved?

Eve: In most states, physicians are required to earn a certain number of CME credits each year. They do so by

accessing medical education in many formats. Typically, they earn credits through live symposia, hospital grand rounds, Podcasts, print or online materials, and other formats. Writers at INNOVIA work interactively with physician experts and other health care professionals to develop content for these various kinds of CME materials.

AMWA: What was your first medical writing position and how did you find it?

Eve: I got a Science Writer/Editor position for a contract company in Washington, DC. I was hired to work full time on projects for the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. I got the job interview by advertising myself in the AMWA Job Market Listing. They used to allow this as a one-time service for new members. You can advertise now only as a freelance. I got quite a few phone calls as a result of the ad; I was pleasantly surprised.

AMWA: How does your current job differ from your first job?

Eve: I'm not currently a medical writer—now I'm "management," so it's completely different.

AMWA: How is being in "management" different than being a medical writer? What skills carry over?

Eve: The biggest difference is being responsible for staff other than myself, which has been a big adjustment. One carry-over is that writing is essential to the role—but not medical writing. Another carry-over is the ability to carefully prioritize to keep multiple projects on the move.

AMWA: What is a typical workday like for you?

Eve: Because the CME industry is undergoing tremendous changes, no day at my job is like the previous or the next. On a given day, I may come in thinking I'll spend the morning reviewing projects for certification and end up fielding questions, from staff or the company leadership, on changes in compliance guidelines (CME is a heavily regulated area—partly because it is often funded through educational grants from pharmaceutical companies). I travel a fair amount, mainly to trade and association meetings relevant to this field. I do a lot of training on CME for INNOVIA staff.

AMWA: What do you find most rewarding/challenging?

Eve: With the CME industry in flux, keeping up with the changes is an interesting challenge. In general CME is more regulated than ever before—we take direction not just from the ACCME but also from the FDA, the American Medical Association, and the Office of the Inspector General of Health and Human Services.

One of the most exciting changes in CME is a shift toward showing educational outcomes—in other words, (1) Did participants in our educational activities learn from it? (2) Did they make changes and improvements in clinical practice as a result of what they learned? (3) Did their patients benefit as a result? We try to incorporate tools into our educational activities that both facilitate and gauge learning and change.

AMWA: What surprised you most when you first started in the field?

Eve: When I first looked for medical writer positions, I was pleasantly surprised at how easy it was to find a job even without much direct experience. Now I know that medical writers are generally in high demand and that it's to be expected that they come from a really wide array of background and experience.

AMWA: Is there anything that surprises you now?

Eve: Some days, I am surprised to find myself in a management position! Like many people with my background, I am pretty self-directed and independent, and I really value that. But I am enjoying what I do and the role I now play in guiding INNOVIA staff (including our medical writers).

AMWA: When you hire a newer medical writer, what qualities and skills do you look for?

Eve: I don't directly hire medical writers, but my input is requested in interviews. I tend to value independence and self-direction. Also, I think the best medical writers we've had are those who love to learn and are eternally curious about medicine and science. I weigh the quality of writing samples and/or writing tests very heavily—in my opinion, medical writing should be precise, succinct, clear, as free of jargon as possible, and accurate.

In the CME world, we also tend to look for expertise in specific therapeutic areas (say in cardiology or neurology) that fit the areas we do our work in. Experience in multiple therapeutic areas is always a plus. Experience in CME per se is not necessarily that critical, but experience in education would be a real asset.

AMWA: What are the best ways for a newcomer to establish himself or herself as a medical writer?

Eve: As corny as it may sound, I would start by joining AMWA or the Council of Science Editors and learn as much as you can about being a really good writer. Get some great AMWA courses under your belt and get some writing experience under your belt. I was fortunate in having written some research articles and had them published.

AMWA: What are the qualities of a really good writer to you?

Eve: The best medical writers to me are those who can

- Find the information they need
- Digest complex information
- Understand what subset of the information is most important to pull out for the intended target audience (eg, what's important to a physician in a specialty area vs. what's important to a primary care physician or a nurse practitioner)
- Communicate the information accurately and at a level that is appropriate for the target audience

And as I mentioned earlier, independence and a passion for science and medicine are excellent qualities in a medical writer.

AMWA: What resources do you recommend for a writer in his or her first position?

Eve: I trained myself in writing and editing starting way back, in graduate school. I relied heavily on the Robert A. Day books—*How to Write and Publish a Scientific Paper* and *Scientific English*. I would recommend taking as many of the basic courses at AMWA meetings as possible—there is nothing better than a strong foundation.

AMWA: Any last advice for people just starting out or looking to transition into medical writing?

Eve: Don't limit yourself—the medical writing field has never been broader. Now there are opportunities with newspapers, government agencies, journal publishers, medical associations, online services (eg, Medscape), pharmaceutical companies (with a range of possibilities from new drug submissions to patient education materials), and medical education companies.