

BIOGRAPHY

William Harold Swanberg: Radiologist, Organizer, and Philanthropist

Tom Lang / Principal, Tom Lang Communications and Training International, Kirkland, WA

ABSTRACT

The American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) currently bestows 3 awards in honor of 3 of its members: Harold Swanberg, MD, the founder of the Association; Walter Alvarez, MD, in retirement, a nationally syndicated health columnist; and John McGovern, MD, a philanthropist who supported initiatives in biomedical communications. However, the details of the lives of these men are unknown to most AMWA members. Accordingly, this biography describes the life and accomplishments of AMWA's founder, Harold Swanberg, to recognize his achievements and to contribute to the history of the profession and of the Association.

Most AMWA members have heard of Harold Swanberg, the Association's founder, but the details of his life are not commonly known. As are those of so many early AMWA members, Harold's life is notable for several reasons.¹ He contributed to the fields of radiology, scientific publications, medical writing—and chiropractic. He started several organizations in addition to AMWA, some of which were charitable foundations supporting college-bound high school students, and founded 3 journals, each of which lasted 50 years. In fact, he was an innovator throughout his life (Figure 1).



Figure 1. William Harold Swanberg BSc, MD, FACP (1891-1970), founder of the American Medical Writers Association.

PERSONAL LIFE

William Harold Swanberg, BSc, MD, FACP, was born in Philadelphia in 1891.² Details on his early life are scant, but we do know that he was married twice. In 1919, he married Zoe Johnson (1885? -?), his office assistant at the time,² with whom he had a son, William H. Swanberg, Jr (1921-1987). William was likely present when AMWA was formed and may have been a member the rest of his life,¹ although prob-

ably in name only (Lillian Sablack, former executive director of AMWA, telephone conversation, July 24, 2020).

His second wife was Mildred W. Chapman (1901-1987). Mildred had 2 daughters, JoAnn Spiva Kimball (1923-2021) and Mary Louise Spiva Burnham (1926-1999), and she and Harold had a daughter, Nancy G. Bradshaw (1935-2016). Nancy attended Francis Shimer junior college—at age 15—and, after studying at the Sorbonne, received a degree in English from the University of Missouri in 1955.³ In the 1960s, she taught medical writing at Baylor College of Medicine. She became an AMWA Fellow in 1963.³

EARLY YEARS

At age 19, Harold was working his way through medical school as an assistant in a histological laboratory when he became interested in “the claims of some of the cults of that period.”⁴ The laboratory appears to have been that of Oakley G. Smith, the founder of naprapathy and the Chicago Naprapathy College.⁵ (Other sources describe Harold as being a student of Smith,^{6,7} which may be more self-serving than accurate.) Smith himself was a protégé of Daniel David Palmer, the founder of chiropractic. For whatever chiropractic has become, it originated from Palmer's pseudoscientific beliefs about healing. Smith eventually split from Palmer in 1907 and founded naprapathy, which focuses on diet and on manipulating connective tissue rather than the spine.⁷

In 1914, after 4 years of work and at age 23, Harold published *The Intervertebral Foramen: An Atlas and Histological Description of an Intervertebral Foramen and its Adjacent Parts* (Chicago Scientific Publishing; 1914). This book presented the first photomicrographs and scientific descriptions of the intervertebral foramen (in cats).⁷ A year later, he published *The Intervertebral Foramina in Man* (Chicago Scientific Publishing; 1915). These books definitively disproved the “stepping-on-the-hose” theory of chiropractic, which was the metaphor for vertebral pressure impinging on nerve cells as the cause of disease.^{7,8} Several legitimate medical journals gave the books good reviews and, despite the books' conclusions, they were standard works in chiropractic for decades⁸ and are still sold on alternative medicine websites.⁹

Oakley Smith had been dissecting spines since 1905, in the interest of chiropractic theory, and Harold's work was related to Smith's investigations.⁷

A year later, at age 25, Harold graduated from the Chicago College of Medicine and Surgery, which is now part of Loyola University.^{2,10}

PROFESSIONAL YEARS

William Roentgen discovered X-rays in 1895, 4 years after Harold was born.² Thus, this new field of Roentgenology was only 20 years old when Harold became a physician. He might have been attracted to the field earlier, but in 1917, he enlisted in the Army Medical Corps, received a commission as First Lieutenant, and studied at the School of Military Roentgenology in Chicago before being sent to Fort Riley, Kansas. He remained in the Army reserves until 1924.^{2,4}

After leaving the military, he moved to Quincy, Illinois, a small city on the Mississippi River. In 1919, he opened the Quincy X-Ray and Radium Laboratories.² Soon thereafter, he married his assistant, Zoe Johnson, and their son William was born.²

As a new radiologist, Harold was instrumental in founding the Physicians and Surgeons Radium Association of Quincy in 1921. The purpose of the Association was "to disseminate a knowledge of the use of radium and to maintain hospitals."²

A short 2 years later, he organized and was elected secretary of the Adams County Medical Society and was the Society's librarian for 30 years. He also suggested that the Society publish a monthly bulletin.² The first issue of the *Adams County Medical Society Bulletin* was published in 1923. Eventually, the name was changed to *The Quincy Medical Bulletin* to "help build Quincy into a larger and better medical center." The Bulletin was published until 1970, and at its peak, was sent to hundreds of physicians.²

A year later, in 1924, Harold started another journal, *The Radiologic Review*, which became the *Mississippi Valley Medical Journal* in 1939. It became *Clinical Medicine* in 1960 and was published until 1978.²

Harold was also a charter member of the Quincy Physicians Club, a medical study club whose members met twice a month to present and discuss cases.² The Club held an all-day conference every year until the Great Depression. Out of the Club would come the Mississippi Valley Medical Society.²

Over the next several years, Harold invented and marketed an applicator for treating gynecological cancers with radiotherapy,¹¹ maintained a private practice, worked as a radiologist at both Quincy hospitals and at some of the

smaller area hospitals, took a graduate course at Harvard, and spent 6 months in graduate studies in Vienna (Box 1).²

Box 1. Odds and Ends of Harold Swanberg's Life

In 1939, as president of the Kiwanis Club, he suggested Quincy High School develop a rifle range and coordinated its development. It was used by both the girls' and the boys' rifle teams, the Young Men's Christian Association, the National Guard, the Catholic Youth Association, and the Quincy Kiwanis Rifle Team.¹⁴ (Gun clubs were common in high schools at the time, as well as for many years after World War II.)

He created what might have been the first registry of freelance medical writers and editors, eventually expanded so that it could also include "salaried people."⁴

He was instrumental in establishing the first vocational guidance program and a guidance counselor position at his local high school in Quincy, Illinois.¹

In the McCarthy era of the 1950s, Harold was successful in amending the AMWA Constitution to exclude anyone in the Communist or Fascist parties from becoming members. The rationale was "Having witnessed the infiltration of other vehicles of communication by subversive forces, it is our duty to safeguard the association against such influences." The announcement was titled "Communists and Fascists Beware!"⁴

He served on the board of directors of the Unitarian Church for many years (a photograph of one of his adopted or to be adopted daughters appears in the same booklet).

His last official act appears to have been casting the only vote opposing nonphysicians from becoming president of AMWA, an initiative the board felt necessary if the Association were to continue. Thus, his death also marked the passing of the era that he began 2 decades earlier.²⁵ (The first nonphysician to be elected president was Eric Martin, PhC [pharmaceutical chemist], BsC [bachelor's degree in pharmaceutical chemistry], MS, PhD, who had founded the Drug Information Agency a few years before. Hardly a step down from physician presidents.)

In 1932, he published his third book, *Radiologic Maxims*, a collection of sayings and platitudes about radiology

(Figure 2).¹³ The book was not well received.^{13,14} In the 1950s, he also published several articles in the *Mississippi Valley Medical Journal* on medical topics and several editorials on social policy (eg, fluoridation of drinking water, Social Security) as well as with issues in medical writing.⁴

In 1935, he helped found the Mississippi Valley Medical Society. The 250 charter members elected him secretary-treasurer. By 1945, it had 800 members.²

In 1940, he started yet another organization, the Mississippi Valley Medical Editors Association (MVMEA), whose purpose was to support the editors of state and local medical society bulletins and the physicians who were writing for these publications. The MVMEA was not the first editors' association, however. To put the MVMEA and AMWA in context, we have to look at the growth of scientific publishing just after the Civil War.

THE AMERICAN MEDICAL EDITORS ASSOCIATION

With some notable exceptions (eg, *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 1812; *The Journal of the American Medical Association [JAMA]*, 1883), for most of the 1800s, "medical journalism" consisted of a handful of serious, society-sponsored journals (including those from state and local medical societies that would eventually be recruited by the MVMEA); many non-society proprietary journals publishing more-or-less legitimate medical articles; and advertising-driven tabloids (today's "throw-aways"). Out of this environment, shortly after the Civil War, a group of journal editors formed the American Medical Editors Association (AMEA) to promote journal editing as a "distinct medical speciality."¹⁵

By the turn of the century, AMEA had hundreds of members nationwide, many with international reputations,¹⁶⁻¹⁹ and was important enough that several leading medical journals published reports on its annual meetings, key papers, and presidential addresses.¹⁵ During this period, for the first time, some journal editors became part- or full-time, paid professionals.¹⁵

The AMEA was formed at the 1869 meeting of the American Medical Association (AMA). One of the founders—and its first president—was Dr Nathan S. Davis, the founder of the AMA.²⁰ Over the years, however, the values

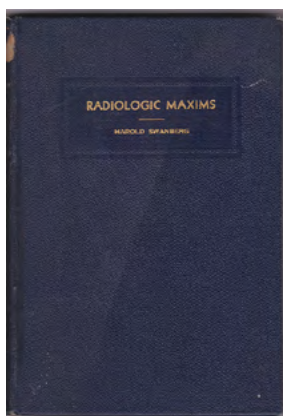


Figure 2. *Radiologic Maxims* by William Harold Swanberg.

of the AMEA and the AMA diverged (Box 2). The AMEA would eventually criticize the business practices of AMA presidents George Simmons and his hand-picked successor, Morris Fishbein, who between them directed (read: ruled) the Association from 1889 to 1950.²¹ (Both were eventually forced from office for ethics violations, including deceptive business practices.) Also, the AMA "opposed all health insurance on the grounds that 'no third party must be permitted to come between the patient and his physician in any medical relation.'"²² In contrast, the AMEA had long advocated creating a national health department lead by a cabinet-level secretary "to protect the health of the public."^{23,24} (The forerunner to the Department of Health and Human Services would be established in 1953.)

Harold was good friends with Fishbein, who became an important AMWA member. But it is no accident that Fishbein disparages the AMEA as a predecessor to AMWA in the very first sentence of his foreword to Harold's *History of the American Medical Writers Association*.⁴ That said, Fishbein was an ardent supporter of AMWA from the beginning and used his influence as "the voice of American physicians" to advance the Association. He started the Chicago chapter, served as president of the Association in 1958, and received the Distinguished Service Award in 1962.²⁵

The AMEA survived World War I but not the Great Depression. A similar fate would befall the MVMEA, which, to survive, had to evolve into a new organization: AMWA.

Box 2. The American Medical Editors or Writers or Authors Association

In 1928, an organization similar to, or a continuation of (accounts conflict^{15,20}), the AMEA was formed—the American Medical Editors and Authors Association—which appears to have favored the for-profit and throw-away journals who competed with society journals for advertising income. The AMA was critical of the new association because its members were publishing "proprietary preparations as have not been approved by the Council on Pharmacy and Chemistry."²⁰ Not said was the fact that the Council on Pharmacy and Chemistry was created and controlled by the AMA's president, George Simmons, who awarded its approval to drugs not for their safety and efficacy but for how much the manufacturer advertised in the journal. In 1889, when Simmons came to power, the journal's advertising income was \$34,000; by 1909, it was \$150,000.²¹

THE AMERICAN MEDICAL WRITERS ASSOCIATION

The MVMEA did not survive World War II. The War prevented meetings between 1942 and 1948, at which time interest was waning among the 42 remaining members. Harold decided to create a national organization that would be open to everyone in medical publishing, not just to journal editors. To prime the pump, he persuaded his friend, Morris Fishbein, then editor-in-chief of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, to offer a 2-hour course on medical writing at the 1948 meeting. On September 29, 1948, the Mississippi Valley Medical Editors Association was renamed the American Medical Writers Association, “America’s only Association Devoted to Improvement of the Written Word of Medicine.”⁴

In founding AMWA, Harold had several goals, all but one of which were met admirably during his time and some of which continue to drive the Association’s activities today. All the successes described below were achieved by volunteers; AMWA had no paid staff until Lillian Sablack became the first Executive Director of AMWA in 1973 (Lillian Sablack, telephone communication, July 24, 2020).

Goal 1: Publish a bulletin. When the Mississippi Valley Medical Editors Association was renamed AMWA in 1948, it adopted the *Mississippi Valley Medical Journal* as its publication.⁴ In 1951, AMWA also began to publish the *Quarterly Bulletin of the American Medical Writers Association*, which was published until 1985, at which time its name was changed to the *AMWA Journal*. The *Mississippi Valley Medical Journal* was absorbed by *Clinical Medicine* in 1960. The *AMWA Newsletter* was published beginning in 1970 and *Medical Communications* in 1972.⁴ In 1978, the newsletter was incorporated into *Medical Communications*, and in 1986, *Medical Communications* was incorporated into the *AMWA Journal*.²⁵

Goal 2: Start regional chapters. AMWA began with 42 members. By 1958, the number was 1,254, and by 1965, more than 1,800.⁴ By 1965, the Association had 9 chapters in the United States and 1 in Mexico City. Today, more than 4,000 members are included in 16 North American chapters.²⁶

Goal 3: Bestow awards. Early in its existence, AMWA established 3 awards. The Distinguished Service Award consisted of a gold medal and a certificate given for “distinguished contributions to the medical literature or rendered unusual and distinguished service to the medical profession.” The first recipient of the Distinguished Service Award

was Harold himself, in 1952. (The gold medal was discontinued in 1963.)⁴

The Honor Award was also a gold medal and a certificate given irregularly for “distinguished contributions to the medical literature.” (That gold medal was discontinued in 1963, too.)⁴

Finally, the Honor Award for Distinguished Service in Medical Journalism was given to medical journals in 6 categories: general medical journals, specialist and research journals, state medical society journals, county or city medical journals, controlled circulation journals, and “other.”⁴

Goal 4: Establish fellowships. The Association has awarded hundreds of fellowships over the years. Notable fellows include Morris Fishbein and George Simmons, editors of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*; Karl Menninger, founder of the Menninger Psychiatric Clinic; Alton Ochsner, founder of the Ochsner Clinic in New Orleans; Frances Kelsey, the Food and Drug Administration employee who prevented thalidomide from being marketed in the United States; Michael E. DeBakey, the heart surgeon, and his sisters, Lois and Selma DeBakey; and Joseph Garland, editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine*.⁴

Goal 5: Begin a manuscript editing service. Between 1952 until at least 1965, AMWA ran a contract editing service for its members to “help maintain and advance high standards of medical literature.” Harold proposed the service (of course), which provided line-by-line critiques but did not do library research, compile bibliographies, or provide ghostwriting. The first editor was Theodore Peterson, a doctoral student at the University of Illinois, who, after almost 6 years, had edited 600 manuscripts. The rate was \$5 per 1,000 words, and articles were limited to 5,000 words.

Goal 6: Establish college degree programs in “medical journalism.” One of Harold’s most important projects was to establish degree programs in “medical journalism.”⁴ (Today, however, “medical journalism” refers to “science writing.”) In 1954, the University of Illinois and the University of Missouri (in conjunction with their respective medical schools) and later, the University of Oklahoma, began offering a Bachelor of Science degree in Medical Journalism and Writing. The University of Illinois program consisted of about an equal number of units in the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and journalism. To support these programs, AMWA established several “Harold Swanberg Medical Journalism Scholarships,” funded by

donations (all from Harold, of course).⁴ Although Harold approached 7 grant-making foundations and sent promotional materials to 250 pharmaceutical, medical publishing, and medical advertising companies, he obtained no outside funding.

The programs did not do well. In his history of AMWA, Harold mentions only 11 students who enrolled in the programs, and only 2 who graduated.⁴ Today, however, several AMWA members are or have been closely involved with the medical writing and editing programs at the University of Chicago,²⁷ the University of the Sciences in Philadelphia (although the program ended this year when the University merged with St John's University), and the University of San Diego Extension.²⁸

Goal 7: Offer a traveling lectureship program. From 1955 to 1961, AMWA member Jacques Gray, MD, MPH, delivered 37 lectures on behalf of AMWA at medical centers and pharmaceutical companies on the East Coast. Gray, a former Dean of the Medical College of Virginia and the Medical School at the University of Oklahoma, was Director at the time of Special Medical Services for Park, Davis & Company, which funded the program. He continued to lecture on AMWA's behalf until his death in 1961.⁴

Goal 8: Exhibit at professional meetings. In Harold's *History of the American Medical Writers Association* is a 1956 photo of him and a colleague recruiting at a booth at the World Medical Association conference in Havana, Cuba.⁴ The exhibit, created by Harold (of course) was also shown at several conferences in the United States. In a related project, after one of its own meetings, AMWA published a small book titled *A Group of Papers on Medical Writing*.²⁹ The 11 chapters were written by distinguished AMWA members. An astounding 20,000 copies were published in 2 editions. The book is still relevant and is available for less than \$20.

Goal 9: Nurture sustaining memberships. In 1965, AMWA had 26 sustaining members paying an annual fee to support the Association. Almost all were major pharmaceutical companies, in which AMWA members tended to be division heads or vice presidents.⁴

PHILANTHROPIC ACTIVITIES

In 1942, Harold had founded the Swanberg Medical Foundation, a not-for-profit trust fund administered by the Adams County Medical Society, to "sponsor ... things of a charitable, scientific, literary or educational nature... which would bring public and professional honor and

respect to the medical profession..."² Eventually, the foundation supported the Society for Academic Achievement (SAA), which was "dedicated to motivate youth to achieve academic excellence ... (and) to lead the academically talented to pursue the proper subjects so they can procure a college education and become future intellectual leaders."² The foundation and the SAA continue to make awards, most recently to seniors at Quincy High School. In 1956, Harold also developed and launched the Quincy Major Learning Program, to help high school students enter and graduate from college.¹

HIS LEGACY

A heart attack ended Harold's medical career in 1959. He died in 1970, at age 79, but not before publishing volume I of a planned 2-volume history of the AMWA in 1965.^{2,4} (Volume II was never written.) In 1962, the Association renamed the Distinguished Service Award **The Harold Swanberg Distinguished Service Award**. This award is presented "to any active member of AMWA who has made distinguished contributions to medical communication or rendered unusual and distinguished services to the medical profession."

In his professional life, Harold formed 5 organizations, started 3 journals, and established 3 educational foundations. By founding AMWA, he created a structure that would advance the field of medical writing for decades to come. It is fitting that the Harold Swanberg Award is AMWA's highest honor.

Author declaration and disclosures: *The author reports no competing interests in relation to this article.*

Author contact: tomlangcom@aol.com

References

1. Harvey B. Harold Swanberg: how I wish I knew you! *AMWA J*. 2019;34(1):18-23.
2. Dittmer A. Medical writing was a passion for longtime Quincy physician. Historical Society of Quincy & Adams County website. Published February 24, 2019. Accessed October 19, 2022. <https://www.hsqac.org/medical-writing-was-a-passion-for-longtime-quincy-physician>
3. Obituary. Nancy Swanberg Bradshaw. Legacy website. Accessed June 4, 2020. <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/whig/obituary.aspx?n=nancy-swanberg-bradshaw&pid=180120975&fhid=17874>
4. Swanberg H. *History of the American Medical Writers Association and Its Previous Associated Organizations*. Vol 1. Society for Academic Achievement; 1965.
5. A historical review. Lucky Bodies and Happy Souls website. Accessed July 30, 2020. <http://www.luckybodies.com/en/naprapathy/naprapathy-history>
6. Ebrall P, Murakami, Y. Constructing a credible case report: assembling your evidence. *J Contemp Chiropr*. 2018;1:45-58.

7. Senzon SA. The chiropractic vertebral subluxation part 3: complexity and identity from 1908 to 1915. *J Chiropr Humanit.* 2019;25:36–51.
8. Senzon S. Salutogenesis, chiropractic, and medical research. The Institute Chiropractic website. Published May 18, 2019. Accessed July 30, 2020. <https://www.institutechiro.com/salutogenesis-chiropractic-and-medical-research/>
9. AcupunctureProducts.com. Accessed July 27, 2020. <https://www.acupunctureproducts.com/>
10. Batesel P. American College of Medicine and Surgery. Lost Colleges website. Accessed July 30, 2020. <https://www.lostcolleges.com/american-college-of-medicine-and-surgery>
11. Swanberg H. A new radium applicator for carcinoma of the cervix. *JAMA.* 1928;90(16):1289.
12. Quincy High School – shadow yearbook (Quincy, IL) – class of 1937. E-Yearbook website. Accessed July 6, 2020. http://www.e-yearbook.com/yearbooks/Quincy_High_School_Shadow_Yearbook/1937/Page_58.html
13. Radiologic Maxims. *Ind Med Gaz.* 1933;68(7):413–414.
14. Radiologic Maxims. *Arch NeurPsych.* 1933;29(5):1177.
15. Connor JJ. Medical journal editors unite. *Fugitive Leaves* blog. Published May 24, 2016. Accessed June 30, 2020. <https://histmed.collegeofphysicians.org/medical-journal-editors-unite/>
16. Carney C. Biography of Henry W. Coe. In: *History of Oregon Illustrated*; vol 2. The Pioneer Historical Publishing Company; 1922.
17. Harris S. The nation’s greatest need: a national department of health. *Am J Pub Health.* 1920;10(8):633–636.
18. Saunders EG, Maine State Library. *Douglas Armour Thom Correspondence.* Maine State Library Special Collections; 2015. Accessed June 30, 2020. https://digitalmaine.com/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1597&context=maine_writers_correspondence
19. Estes C. Seale Harris: remembering Alabama’s sugar pioneer. *UAB Magazine* website. 2009. Accessed October 20, 2022. <https://www.uab.edu/uabmagazine/winter2009/cover/sealeharris>
20. Palmer BB. Report of the Commission on Journalism. *J Am Coll Dent.* 1935;2(2–3):120–152.
21. Ullman D. How the AMA got rich & powerful: “The AMA’s Seal of Approval.” HuffPost website. Published November 10, 2014. Accessed June 30, 2020. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-the-ama-got-rich-powe_b_6103720
22. Millenson ML. Medicare, fair pay, and the AMA: the forgotten history. HealthAffairs website. Published September 10, 2015. Accessed June 30, 2020. <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/10.1377/hblog20150910.050461/full/>
23. A medical officer in the President’s Cabinet? *J Abnorm Soc Psych.* 1928;23(3):262–263.
24. Wile IS. Ira Solomon Wile papers. University of Rochester; 1894–1943. Accessed June 12, 2020. <https://rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/finding-aids/AW66>
25. Schiffrin MJ. A history of the *AMWA Journal.* *AMWA J.* 2000;15(3): 11–22. Accessed October 21, 2022.
26. American Medical Writers Association. AMWA website. Accessed June 30, 2020. <https://www.amwa.org>
27. Medical writing and editing. University of Chicago website. Accessed June 30, 2020. <https://grahamschool.uchicago.edu/academic-programs/professional-development/medical-writing-and-editing>
28. Medical writing. UC San Diego Extended Studies website. Accessed June 30, 2020. <https://extension.ucsd.edu/courses-and-programs/medical-writing-courses>
29. Gray JP, ed. *A Group of Papers on Medical Writing.* Parke, Davis & Company; 1957.

Get FIT
with AMWA

**FAST
INTERACTIVE
TRAINING**

www.amwa.org/fit

AMWA EDUCATION
Write better. Write now.

AMWA’s FIT Series helps medical communicators stay healthy. In only 15 minutes—jog your memory, tone your writing muscles, build your core skills, and stretch your knowledge.

Topics in the series include:

- ▶ Misplaced Modifiers
- ▶ Mean, Median, and Mode
- ▶ Dangling Participles
- ▶ Measures of Variability

Only \$15 each / Approved for .5 CE