

CONFERENCE

2022 Harold Swanberg Distinguished Service Award Address Aspire to More: Raising the Bar on Medical Writing

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The Harold Swanberg Distinguished Service Award, named in honor of one of the founders of AMWA, is presented to an active AMWA member who has made distinguished contributions to medical communication or rendered unusual and distinguished services to the medical profession. The Swanberg Distinguished Service Award is presented during AMWA's Medical Writing & Communication Conference.

I am greatly honored to even have been considered for this award, and I want to say thank you to all those involved in selecting me for it.

When I received the announcement that I was getting the award, my first reaction was, "Oh wow..." followed quickly by, "So, why me?" As I tried to see myself from the outside, I realized that the thing that probably makes me eligible for this award is my ongoing, almost obsessive passion for medical writing and its importance to the pharmaceutical industry and the world.

Science is nothing without people thinking about what it means. Contrary to what people may say, data do not speak for themselves. We, as informed and skeptical creatures, look at the data and think about what they mean. As we begin to assemble each piece of insight, we put together a narrative and meaning. But that narrative only becomes powerful and has a transformative impact if it is communicated, and the knowledge is transferred from the few who are mining those nuggets of information to the rest of the world. Thus, science only begets progress if it is communicated effectively, and that's where we come in.

Without medical writers who understand how to take the data beyond just numbers on a page and turn it into a convincing narrative, progress will stutter. Whether we are regulatory writers crafting a document that succinctly expresses to the assessors why the benefit of a drug outweighs the risk or we are in the med comms space taking the science out to the public so that people can better understand their bodies and their illnesses and the available treatments, we are bringing the message to the world.



The better we do our job, the faster the messages of today will drive the science and developments of tomorrow and improve the lives of people throughout the world. We saw so clearly during the pandemic the importance of getting clear messages out to the world to avoid confusion and mistrust in science.

So, I honestly do not believe it is an exaggeration when I say that medical writers bring the light to the world. Hard-won light gleaned by researchers and doctors and patients who commit to research so we can learn more. But it is we who tell the world what has been learned, which is why it is our responsibility to get it right. To make sure that the texts we write are clear and focused on what matters. To ensure that no word is wasted and that we stand firm when teams start to veer toward text that merely repeats the data without any message, or long-winded, convoluted presentations for the public that confuse rather than inform. We can and must strive to show the teams we work with how much more our documents can be and why. Helping them understand the "why" is the key to achieving change.

And yet, curiously, I hear over and over again from medical writers how medical writers have no authority on our teams. I don't believe that. In fact, I am of the opinion that if we believe we have no authority, we never will. Having authority has to do with belief in self, in how you enter a room, in how you engage with others. First, you have to believe you are legitimate and that what you bring to the conversation is equal in value to what anyone else brings to it.

But when I started out in the industry, I was afraid to speak up in meetings, afraid to ask questions. When I did, I would be so nervous that I turned beet red, and that really didn't help my self-confidence any! But two key things helped me understand that I could and should speak up.

First, I recognized something important. I noticed that when I was in meetings, I often had a question or thought about something people were discussing. But I wouldn't speak up because I thought, well, that is so obvious; if it made any sense, the other more experienced people in the room would already have said it. Right? So, I would sit in these meetings and watch conversations go around in circles, sometimes for an hour or more, and finally, somebody else would state what I thought of an hour ago or ask the question that I wanted to ask. And everybody else would go, "Oh yes, exactly, that's right!" What I realized was that maybe some of those "obvious" thoughts I was having weren't so obvious and not so silly, and if I would only raise them as soon as I thought them, I could actually contribute meaningfully to saving us all time and making progress.

But then I had to overcome my insecurity. Knowing I should say something was very different than being able to say it, let alone saying it confidently and without turning into a tomato. And that was where the second thing came into play that helped me gain the courage to speak with authority. I was lucky to have a strong role model in the room with me— Dr Barry Drees was one of the senior writers in my department, and we worked on several big projects together. If some of you are lucky enough to know Barry, you will know that he can speak about anything to anyone, anywhere, at any time. And that became my goal—to speak as freely and easily as Barry does.

So began about a 2-year journey. The first step was recognizing that I had something to say when I was in a meeting and was literally having heart palpitations in my effort to speak about it. But I would tell myself over and over, what would Barry do right now? He would be speaking. So I would think, "Why aren't you speaking? Open your mouth, girl! Speak!" And I would sometimes. I would

turn beet red, and I was so nervous that what I said was stilted and uneven. But the more I spoke, the more people started to listen. And as I saw the impact of my input and practiced speaking up, there was a transformation, until at some point, I became the person I am now. I speak freely and frequently and have opinions on just about everything. Just like Barry!

The reason I am telling you this is because sometimes people think when I say that medical writers can have authority if they only step up and grab it that it's easy for me to say, or "I'm not like them." But that's not true. I was just lucky enough to have some good teachers and a good role model.



I personally connect strongly with Dr Swanberg's vision to create a curriculum for training medical writers. Without our teachers and role models, only a very few will find success and fulfillment.

Which brings me to the relevance of this award. Some of you may already know who Dr Swanberg was. But I suspect many of you are like I was when I found out about this award, and you don't know much about him and his importance to our career. Harold Swanberg was not only one of the founders of AMWA, he was an outspoken supporter of improving the education at all levels – from schoolchildren to medical writers, believing that offering everyone the opportunity of a good education would help society overall by helping people find fulfilling careers best suited to their abilities and predilections. He cofounded the AMWA Educational Committee in 1951, which focused on creating an appropriate curriculum for undergraduate and graduate programs in medical writing and editing. He also launched a manuscript editing service through AMWA to help physicians improve their documents. Dr Swanberg not only understood that there was a need for people to assist physicians in communicating their findings but that we should be cultivating this function as a career.

I personally connect strongly with Dr Swanberg's vision to create a curriculum for training medical writers. Without our teachers and role models, only a very few will find success and fulfillment. While Dr Swanberg brought

the idea to life of teaching people the essentials of medical writing in an editorial function, today the role of a medical writer has matured into much more. We are communicators, cat herders, solution finders, and leaders. Our training programs must serve all these areas, including teaching each one of us to believe in ourselves and not shy away from guiding our teams to producing documents that really communicate effectively. Medical writing is coming of age, and tailored, effective training is essential to raise the bar on the role and perception of medical writers in our industry.

So, to wrap up, I have to say that I am a bit dazed by getting this award. To be honored by your peers is incredibly rewarding, and I am very thankful for that recognition. But I accept this award with humbleness, for I stand on the

shoulders of giants. From the inspired and tireless efforts of Dr. Swanberg through the generations of champions of the medical writer's cause, I simply carry the torch further. I will do what I can to live up to what this award stands for. Thank you.

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