



# Day in the life

## ... of a medical writer

It is 6.45, Monday morning and I wake up to John Humphries arguing with the first of this week's beleaguered politicians. After a work out at the gym and a quick shower, I am in the office at 9 o' clock feeling full of energy and ready to start my working day.

Work is at Wells Healthcare, a Healthcare communications agency, situated in Tunbridge Wells, Kent. Wells, as it is generally known, has expanded from a small agency specializing in hardcore medical writing to a medium-sized business, now employing over 70 staff. In addition to the traditional methods of medical communication, such as clinical reports, papers and product monographs, Wells are expert in delivering technology-based materials. Interactive CD-ROMs for training purposes, educational websites and database management systems are now very much in demand.



I grab a coffee and open Microsoft Outlook to see what the day, or at least the next hour, has in store. As the clients on my main account are based in Europe, I tend to have quite a few e-mails waiting for me, as they are one hour ahead. Today, however, there is nothing that requires my immediate attention. This means I can get on with the task of proof-reading and amending some text for a colleague who works on a separate account. She is back from holiday and I feel guilty as I promised faithfully that I would have the work finished by the time she returned. Needless to say, I am only halfway through the document. Agency life is completely unpredictable and an unexpected rush job meant a shift in my priorities. Many skills from my time doing a PhD have transposed to a medical writing career, but juggling 10 different and urgent jobs at once is not one of them!

As a perfect example, I am just three lines into hacking text with my trusty red pen, when I am reminded by Morag, the Senior Account Manager, that we have a teleconference with a client imminent. Before calling a client we discuss the agenda to make sure we are clear on all points to be covered. Today's call will be the first of many about a symposium we are managing at the World Congress of Gastroenterology in Bangkok at the end of February. There is a huge amount of work that needs to be done, and not much time to do it.

Symposia are one of the ways that pharmaceutical companies inform the

medical community of the latest developments in their products.

There are many aspects to organizing a symposium. However, as the medical writer on the project I mainly get involved in developing the written material, and Morag will co-ordinate all other aspects. Although we work very much as a team, and help each other out when needed, it is my responsibility to make sure that the areas of the project assigned to me are done correctly, professionally and on time. My first job will be to assist in the production of the briefing notes that need to be supplied to the Opinion Leaders who have agreed to participate as speakers and/or chairpersons. Opinion Leaders are independent world experts in their field, who have usually been extensively involved during the clinical trial phases of the product and are therefore familiar with the compound and trial results. Briefing notes contain suggestions of the content and format of each of the talks and logistical information on the symposium. I will be involved in the writing of these notes and, following approval by the client, I will send them on to the Opinion Leaders. We usually wait a week after sending the briefing notes before we begin to follow up by contacting the Opinion Leaders via e-mail and arranging teleconferences to discuss their presentations further. For the current symposium the speakers hail from Australia, Thailand and America. The time difference between the UK and these countries mean that the

by Lisa Thomas  
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**Lisa's Career tips***Entry qualifications:*

A PhD or alternatively several years' experience in academia or industry, in a medically-related field are required to enter as a Medical Writer.

However, suitable BSc/MSc graduates are recruited at Junior Writer level.

Whatever your qualifications evidence of your writing skills is advisable.

*Career progression:*

Very real opportunities exist to progress to Senior Writer, Account and Senior Account Manager, Account Director up to a Departmental Director. There is no glass ceiling.

*Salary:*

This varies depending on experience but compares well with other healthcare communication agencies. Other benefits include, pension scheme and health insurance. For more information contact Lisa on [lisathomas@wellshealthcare.com](mailto:lisathomas@wellshealthcare.com)



After graduating from Manchester University with a B.Sc. degree in Physiology and Pharmacology Lisa went on to gain a Ph.D. in Neuropharmacology from Imperial College School of Medicine, London. The main focus of her research was the presynaptic control of neuronal glutamate release from cortical, striatal and hippocampal neurones. She joined Wells Healthcare as a Medical Writer in December 2000.

teleconferences often have to take place late at night or early in the morning, as they are arranged for the convenience of the Opinion Leader. Flexibility is certainly a key word in this job! Luckily, we have already worked with, and met, three of the four Opinion Leaders involved in this symposium, following a similar event that took place in Sydney, Australia, last September. It makes our job easier as we have already established professional relationships with them, and we know how they prefer to work. One great thing about this job is the opportunity to travel, and in style! Australia last year, Thailand this year, with possible trips to Brazil, US, Taiwan and Spain coming up.

Once the exact content of each talk has been established, our job is to assist the speakers in anyway we can with the development of presentation materials. For example, busy clinicians often do not have time to write the abstract required for the symposium abstract book. If this is the case, my task is to write a draft copy of an abstract, which the Opinion Leader can then amend. This process can take quite a bit of time as, although a priority for me, it is not the top priority of the Opinion Leader. I often have to resort to pleading e-mails. Although each Opinion Leader has full editorial control, our client also has to be happy with the final content of the abstracts. Unfortunately, for this upcoming event the deadlines are very tight for the production of the abstract book. Not only does it take two weeks to print the abstract books, enough time has to be allowed for them to be shipped to Thailand and cleared through customs. I can envisage a freight two months ahead.

I will also be heavily involved in developing the PowerPoint slides for

every presentation. This means anything from creating them from my research material (or that supplied by the Opinion Leader or client), to amending existing slides sent to us. I also format the slides into a uniform symposium style. Developing the symposium slides is an aspect of my job that I really enjoy. It's good to take a break from hard thinking and writing to concentrate on drawing graphs and diagrams, and making the slides look good. Attention to detail is a must, and it's a great feeling when 500 people in an auditorium are looking at slides that I have been instrumental in generating.

The morning teleconference with our client takes about an hour. During this time we discuss the logistics of the symposium, ideas on the content of the talks and timelines with the client. Following the call, Morag writes a client contact report, detailing our discussion and agreed action points, while I get on drawing-up production schedules for the briefing notes, abstract book and symposium slide development.

The product that Morag and I work with is set to launch onto the world markets this year. So, in addition to symposia, we are involved in the development of other product materials. The training manual, which is the item the client would like to discuss this afternoon, is a tool used to train the sales reps on all aspects of the disease and the drug. We have yet to do all the action points from the previous teleconference and I'm also expecting a call from the States any time after 2 pm. A quick call secures a delay until Tuesday. Unfortunately for me, as well as our client in Europe, we also have to link in to a medical manager who is currently in Hawaii — 10 hours behind. This means we have to schedule the call for 5pm, which will

make it difficult for me to leave at 5.30pm in order to meet up with friends in London as planned.

It can be difficult to stick to social arrangements in this job. The priority is to now compile the training manual content list for discussion tomorrow. Morag and I work together and find that this is relatively easy, as between us we have a huge amount of product knowledge. I also work out a production schedule and e-mail both documents to the client before lunch at home.

Thankfully, the afternoon is far less hectic than the morning. I storm through the proofreading with no further interruptions from clients or colleagues. However, this is unfortunate as I was expecting a call from a client in the States to discuss designs I e-mailed to him on Friday for the product monograph that we have just finished writing. I call him and find that he is currently away at a conference. His PA gives me the number of his hotel and tells me to call him tomorrow at 8am (Chicago time). This is a little frustrating, as there will be at least one day lost in the schedule. If possible, flexibility is usually built into timelines to allow for missed meetings, deadlines and 'the unexpected'.

Home time should be 5.30 but I decide to stay an extra half-an-hour to finish the proof job once and for all. This turns into an hour as I end up chatting with my boss about all the work that needs to be done over the next few months in preparation for the Bangkok symposium. She is usually pretty good at helping me keep things in perspective when I start to panic about the workload! Proofreading finally finished, and I switch off my computer. A glance at my watch tells me if I walk fast enough, I will be home in time for The Archers.