



My journey to freelance medical writing

By *Samina Hamilton*

I've arrived! I own my own business. I'm running a limited company of ... one. Yes, I am a freelance medical writer—ta da! OK then, no drum roll, but I would like to explain how I ended up here.

The timing of the November 2006 European Medical Writers Association (EMWA) meeting in Brussels was what you might call perfect. It was my first meeting as a freelancer, although not my first altogether. I had just taken the plunge on 1 October 2006 and felt poised, but for what I was not sure. I certainly felt different—liberated even—and I was keen to pick up as many tips and meet as many people as I could in three days. This was my chance to learn about freelancing from the experts. In engaging with my peers, I was struck by the varied routes possible to the same end, more or less. We all know the job comes in many guises—regulatory writing or medical communications; clinical research organisation (CRO) or pharmaceutical company; office- or home-based; full- or part-time; salaried or freelance. My own journey went something like this.

As a postdoctoral virologist in 1994, I woke up one morning and realised that as I didn't want to lecture, it was probably time to extricate myself from academia. I didn't see myself as a 'career postdoc' beaver away in the lab for years for the sheer love of it. I did, however, enjoy the logic and discipline of science and decided that rather than reinvent myself completely, I would take the path of clinical, as opposed to academic research. It turned out to be the best career decision I ever made, or rather fell into.

I joined a small, Berkshire-based CRO in 1994 as a field-based clinical research associate (CRA), working from home in Newcastle Upon Tyne in North East England. I worked long hours, driving thousands of miles a year, to visit investigators based across the north of England and southern Scotland. I facilitated the collection of accurate trial data through meticulous attention to detail and gained an applied insight into Good Clinical Practice (GCP) guidelines. I was keen to progress my career, despite having made a decision to stay in Newcastle, because of my husband's job with Northumbria police.

At the time, CROs did not employ field-based clinical project managers (CPMs). The feeling was that this job could only be properly performed in-house. My salvation was a supportive middle manager who realised my potential, coupled with my being a noticeable cog in a small company machine. I became involved with developing company Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and wrote all the manuscripts for publication that the medical writing group landed contracts for. Eventually, my support of the grow-

ing company was rewarded and the position of field-based CPM was borne.

The small CRO environment was a hard and fast training ground where the full range of project management skills was learned quickly. I regularly worked a 60-hour week, particularly when multiple studies were ongoing simultaneously.

Life for me moved on, and I became pregnant in June 1998. A few months on, I realised I couldn't keep up this pace of work and travel and also look after myself and our growing family properly. The company offered me the position of senior medical writer with the option to work part-time on my return from maternity leave, following the birth of my son. I came back to work in 1999 to find we had been taken over by a large CRO and I was now working for a global company with 2500 employees worldwide. It was the fastest route from a small to large CRO, and an invaluable career progression for me, although at the time it did not feel like it. Two years and a baby girl later, I was promoted to the position of clinical scientist. Over the sometimes turbulent following five years, I found myself in the position more than once of supervising the UK medical writing group in the absence of a manager. Later on, following re-organisation, I was charged with running the UK medical writing group. During this period, I honed my skills in business and finance. Success in this role, coupled with increased personal financial stability, convinced me that I could make a real success of freelancing.

First steps: It's all in the planning

Rather than tumbling into freelancing, unlike some of my other career 'decisions', this was more of a well-organised military operation! Too much was at stake for any other approach.

May 2006

I made my final decision to freelance in May 2006. With our youngest due to start school in September 2006, I would be free to start out on my own shortly afterwards.

I immediately did some 'back of an old envelope' calculations and we set aside 6 months' worth of emergency cash in a high interest account.

I proceeded to interview various candidates for the job of handling my accounts. I found an independent freelancer, Lynne, who understood my aspirations and seemed to fit the role perfectly.

I spoke to the three medical writing freelancers I already knew and asked if, in their opinion, there was sufficient available work to support a newcomer. I also subscribed to InPharm.com Job Alerts received directly in my 'in-box'. These began to roll in, sometimes thrice weekly. I was

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gaining a real feel for the type and volume of work that was out there. Having satisfied myself that the freelance market was in good shape and that I had the skills and experience to take a decent share of the cake, I bought a computer and started to investigate locally available resources.

Project North East (PNE) is a government-run agency which supports the start up of small businesses based in North East England. I was assigned a business counsellor, Christine, who immediately advised me to write a business plan. This extremely worthwhile exercise brought my goals into sharp focus. Alistair Reeves' (EMWA Freelance Coordinator) willingness to share with me the results of the EMWA 2003 freelancers' survey was particularly useful at this time. The sourcing of information, researching my market and detailed financial forecasting that went into developing the business plan, forced me to be absolutely realistic about my expectations and targets from the outset.

June 2006

PNE also rather helpfully offered me 30 hours of free information technology (IT) support, and so I met my 'IT guy', Jonathan. He not only ultimately helped with my office set up, but as a web designer, he encouraged me to consider my need for representation on the Web. At this point I realised that I needed to take a step back and at least name my company and brand it before launching into cyberspace.

I wanted to trade on what I saw as my greatest asset which was my established name as a medical writer. I developed clean, simple branding to complement my chosen company name 'Sam Hamilton Medical Writing Services'. Three days later, I had created my website text and Jonathan designed the site in a colour palette to match my branding. The resulting website was sleek, professional and instantly recognisable as mine.

I applied to Companies House for a certificate of incorporation using my chosen company name.

At the end of the month, I sent my letter of resignation to my employer. I was on a 3-month period of notice. By bidding my time and not resigning immediately, I had assured myself a salaried month following my August summer holiday.

July 2006

My website went live in July 2006. Good timing for my first batch of announcement emails to old colleagues in the business who had moved on and up. My twelve years in the CRO sector, eight as a writer, meant that my contacts were now relatively widespread and a number were in key decision-making positions, luckily for me. With my web link in my email signature, prospective clients could not only see my experience and capabilities at a glance, but also a showcase for my writing ability.

I applied for a Newcastle City Council small business grant and was awarded 50% match funding for my anticipated hardware costs. The funding could not be back-dated, so I was glad I had held back on purchase of all items except the computer and basic software package. I set about buying all remaining required hardware and software over the internet which was by far the cheapest source for all products. Jonathan returned, and together we had my state-of-the-art wireless office up and running by early September.

I ordered my business cards—branded, of course!

September 2006

After a memorable and relaxing month in France with my family spent cycling, walking and generally recovering from the intense activity of the previous couple of months, I came home renewed and ready to meet further challenges head-on.

I opened a business bank account, having found one which levied no bank charges providing the account remained in credit.

I had preliminary dealings with the HM Revenue and Customs. I applied for a value added tax (VAT) number which would enable me to reclaim the VAT I had paid on my equipment purchases and offset this against any VAT I would be charging clients and handing on to 'The Revenue'. Throughout, I took advice from Lynne, so that I should not fall unintentionally foul of any tax-related responsibilities. I made arrangements for private healthcare and pension provision.

I reminded old colleagues of my impending start date, eager for the month to pass.

Open for trading**October 2006**

On 1 October 2006, Sam Hamilton Medical Writing Services Limited was launched. I was lucky enough to have work from Day 1 with two contracts executed for October. I prepared slide packs for the business development team of a new medium-sized CRO which was borne of the merger of two smaller CROs. The company was to re-launch using my slides. Being a regulatory writer, I had not done this type of work before, and the change was refreshing. My other piece of work was a more familiar literature review.

I accelerated and diversified my business development activities and entered negotiations with a large pharmaceutical company over a potential preferred provider role.

November & December 2006

After EMWA Brussels, I followed up a number of leads and started to plan out potential business for quarter 1, 2007.

The preferred provider contract with the large pharmaceutical company was executed and I began work on my first report for them. Reporting this trial continues into January 2007 and beyond.

I focused my efforts too on developing a relationship with an expanding statistics and data management group, as I realised that at least a couple of preferred provider-type agreements could free me up from the more intense business development activities in the medium to longer term.

I set up spreadsheets and made sure my records of business expenditure and income were absolutely accurate on an ongoing basis, to ensure no panic arose when records were required for accounting.

I filed my first VAT return—it wasn't all that difficult.

Industry standards dictate that clients are invoiced at the end of the month and 30 days is allowed for receipt of payment. Finally, therefore, in the first week of December, I received my initial earnings from the business. Hurray!

I secured two pieces of unexpected work in December: a feasibility report for a university-based organisation and

part of a study report for a client experiencing last-minute resourcing problems... and all whilst keeping on top of the children's numerous end of term Christmas activities!

Quarter 1, 2007 holds some promise with a few good leads, but I am largely living from one day to the next. So far, I cannot quite believe my luck. It's been something of a whirlwind experience to date and I feel I'm still running on pure adrenaline. Whatever 2007 may hold, I'm secure in the knowledge that the 6 month stash of cash is still available...

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So would I do it all again? Yes, like a shot! I have surprised myself by meeting each challenge as it presents itself, I have greater flexibility and I have gained a sense of real empowerment. I relish the prospect of the year ahead. If you would like to follow my progress during my first year of trading, look out for my articles in following issues of TWS.

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The Viennese coffeehouse

I can't let you come to Vienna without telling you about our coffeehouses. Vienna is famed for its coffeehouses, even Starbucks was inspired by the Viennese coffeehouse. Austrians consume an average of over 8 kilos of coffee beans per year each—much more than Italians. Alfred Polgar (1873-1955), dramatic, essayist and theatre critic, described typical coffeehouse habitués as people whose hostility towards man is as great as their desire to be with people who want to be alone. This is the joy of a coffeehouse, the concept of sitting there alone without feeling self-conscious and pleasing yourself by catching up with the news (newspapers and magazines kindly provided by the establishment), reading, writing, working or dreaming. We have the Turks to thank for all of this. When they scuttled away from their siege of Vienna such was their hurry that they abandoned huge sacks of coffee beans in their camps. A Pole, George Kolschitzky, claimed the bags of coffee as compensation for his services as a spy for the Viennese. He opened the first coffeehouse in Vienna (also the first in Europe) in 1683.

In the coffeehouses you will mix with students, working/business people, politicians, tourists and meticulously dressed old ladies (relicts of a frightfully old fashioned era), in fact with everyone. The waiter (Herr Ober) in his black tuxedo and bow tie will often be finer than the guests, to quote my husband.

I do not go to coffeehouses for cakes. If I feel like a cake I pop into Konditorei (patisserie) Heindl on Kärntnerstrasse for a Wiener Mädel (Viennese girl) torte. In a coffeehouse I order an apple strudel with Schlag (whipped cream) and at lunchtime a Vienna Eintopf (clear soup crammed with vegetables with a memory of meat). When I first arrived in Vienna I used to meet my German teacher regularly in a coffeehouse for lessons. Now if there is time to kill before an appointment a coffeehouse is the place to work. Whole manuscripts are regularly edited in coffeehouses. Nobody comes and asks you to move. The minute you sit down you become part of the furniture. After my Melange (ask for this if you want a cappuccino—Viennese 'Cappuccinos' are drowned in whipped cream) has arrived on its metal tray together with a glass of tap water waiters rarely bother to make further enquiries. Waiters can be terribly snooty. Don't be surprised if they ignore your efforts to attract their attention. Even when it

comes to paying they ignore you until you shout 'Zahlen Bitte' (pay, please)—loudly.

I have my favourites of course. With the exception of Café Central¹ I avoid tourists' haunts. Café Central is such a beautiful building with its pseudo-Gothic vaulted ceiling painted in soft hues that any number of tourists could not deter me. Besides I have a sentimental attachment to the place. It reopened after 43 years of dereliction the very year I arrived in Vienna. I never tier of seeing Peter Altenberg, a poet, immortalised at a table by the entrance. There's a fair amount of mileage to be gained by watching tourists when they realise he is not for real. He was a regular patron and even gave the establishment as his postal address. To mention only a few of his colleagues Arthur Schnitzler, Adolf Loos and Oskar Kokoschka were regular guests and Trotsky, Lenin and Stalin sat together in Café Central. Sigmund Freud and Anton Bruckner preferred the elegant Café Imperial. This offers the Imperial Torte as a culinary delight, which competes with the Sacher Torte as a souvenir to take home with you. Otherwise when I am alone I go to Café Tirolerhof. It's nothing special but their apple strudel is good. For meeting business partners I invariably plump for Café Landtmann. It's central and has a respectable clientele of business people, politicians and journalists befitting the Biedermeier banquettes—naturally the waiters are of the snooty variety. Sometimes I meet friends in Café Schwarenberg, where the genuine atmosphere and small tables next to the window are appealing. Café Frauenhuber, a civil servant's haunt, is also a genuine article. By contrast Aida is a utilitarian coffeehouse chain, but many Viennese consider they serve the best coffee. A colleague regards her local Aida as her second sitting room.

Café Hawelka with its bohemian element is as tatty as it is famous, but far too smoky for me. Its owners have shown wisdom by resisting redecoration. Café Diglas although tastefully restored lost the intellectual and artistic clientele of its heyday through revamping. The Viennese are not too fond of change. Probably this is why the coffeehouse survives.

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¹. All coffeehouses mentioned are in the first district