



The final quarter of my first year as a freelance medical writer

by Sam Hamilton

I'm there and I can hardly believe it. I have reached the end of my first year out on my own! In previous issues of *The Write Stuff (TWS)*, you heard about my journey to freelance medical writing and my first nine months in business. I'd like to bring this series of articles to a close by sharing my experiences over this final quarter of my first year in business with you. The last three months have included a welcome break from fast-paced previous months and some promise for the future.

Months 9 to 12

July 2007

I fine-tuned a couple of PowerPoint presentations for two talks I was due to give at Newcastle University in July. The first was an interactive session on SOP writing for the staff of the local teaching hospital involved in investigator-led clinical research. I had already received some useful pointers from Wendy Kingdom, but felt the presentation would come to life with one or two more applied examples of how good SOP writing can really save the day. I called on my friend and experienced freelancer, Debbie Jordan, to see if she could help. She was kind enough to share her experiences of recent Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) inspections with me and, as a result, I delivered a powerful presentation peppered with real life applications and examples of good—and bad—SOP writing. It was certainly of benefit to the audience as the sheaf of forty-plus completed course assessment forms indicated.

The second presentation was no less interesting. I had been asked by my old PhD supervisor and erstwhile professor now overseeing the education and development programme for postgraduate students in the medical school, to talk to them about my career to date and medical writing in particular. To say I enjoyed this could be described as something of an understatement! Who wouldn't want to share their experiences with a group of interested individuals? The theatre was packed and I was glad that at the end of the session, many people wanted to continue the 'conversation', over the buffet lunch. It was good to be able to tell them that medical writing was a realistic career option, outside of academia, offering a great deal of opportunity and personal fulfilment.

I was still exhausted from my mammoth double clinical study report (CSR) efforts in May and June, so I took advantage of the slow down and, apart from the two lec-

tures and two very small ad-hoc pieces of work which came in unexpectedly, I coasted towards our impending family holiday in the third week of July, helping out at school often.

I contributed to articles for *TWS* and enjoyed working with a small group of freelancers in preparation of some of the material (see the October 2007 issue's 'Out on our own' feature).

Amid much excitement, Paul, Cameron (aged 8), Aanya (aged 5) and I fled the country immediately after the end of school term, for our big American adventure! We spent the first 5 days with



Hamiltons in USA

Helen, my good friend and now business partner in a large protocol writing project for a pharmaceutical giant, and her family. It was wonderful to be together again, and our four children, having met before, managed to pick up where they left off, which was a real bonus.

Helen had sensibly scheduled a meeting with the client while I was around. With three representatives from the US team, and me representing the UK contingent, we had a fruitful and mutually beneficial exchange. Everything was on target for kick-off in early September 2007.

August 2007

We went onto Wyoming and did the 'cowboy country thing' for nine action-packed days, including white-water rafting (yes, all of us), horse-riding, mountain biking, hiking, wildlife watching, geyser gawping, a rodeo evening, chuck-wagon supper—the whole kit and caboodle. We were all exhausted and ready for five days with my Aunt and her family in New York. What a way to end our adventure!

We arrived home in the middle of the month to the usual piles of accumulated post which speeded our return to reality. I had a sheaf of general business enquiries and a small but satisfying number of requests for proposals which I attended to during the first week back. The proposals included a CSR for quarters 2 and 3 in 2008, which was a good start.

I received client comments back on the smaller of the two CSRs which I had reported in May. While writing the draft CSR, I had identified several key issues which I felt would

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likely be raised by the client in their review of the draft report. These were issues which should have been addressed earlier in the proceedings, and before my involvement in the study. I provided my client with a summary of lessons that could be learned from the reporting of this study. This value-added service was provided free of charge with the 'lessons learned' document being submitted with the draft CSR in May. The returned client comments received in August were almost exactly as I had predicted in the 'lessons learned' document. By anticipating the likely problems and highlighting them to my client ahead of time, I was in a position to negotiate additional payment for the substantial changes required, as they were effectively out of the scope of our original agreement. I made what changes I could to the CSR and advised the statistician on the new and revised summary tables required. Further CSR revisions were effectively on-hold until the revised output was available.

The nagging thought that my client's processes and procedures could benefit from an overhaul to avoid such problems in the future kept returning to me and I began to think about how I could help them from a more strategic perspective, rather than just a project-based one.

September 2007

Helen had contracted a fellow freelancer, Pat, whom I had met on my recent trip to the US, to conduct quality control (QC) on all the protocols for the study throughout the two years. This approach aimed to provide a degree of inter- and intra-document consistency which would enhance the professionalism of the project as a whole. My protocol QC checklist was developed by Helen and Pat who took it to the next level. Helen wrote the first protocol in late August/early September. She was keen to ensure that Pat was picking everything up she should from a QC perspective and, that I would be tuned-in to the client's requirements in time for my first protocol attempt due in early October, so Helen asked me to QC the first protocol concurrently with Pat. This 'belt and braces' approach gave the client the full measure of the team's capabilities and assured a uniform approach to subsequent writing and QC from day one.

I received revised statistical output for the CSR I was part way through updating with client comments in August. I was therefore able to complete the revisions and submit the second draft of the CSR for QC to Helen. This worked perfectly from a timing perspective as Helen and I made a switch of documents for QC in late September. I performed QC on Helen's protocol while she performed QC on my second draft CSR—neat!

I decided to discuss the nagging thought that my client's processes and procedures needed some improvement with a member of their senior management team. We discussed how best to approach process enhancement and some possibilities for training. Talks were encouraging and are currently ongoing.

I was delighted to be accepted by the EMWA Professional Development Committee (EPDC) as a workshop leader for an EMWA course. The course was to cover scheduling of medical writing deliverables, including CSRs and protocols, and effective proposal writing. Of course, the idea came from working with so many clients with divergent processes over a good number of years, but the idea crystallised in my executing the afore-mentioned CSR, for obvious reasons. I made a start on developing the course materials between spells of paid work during September, as I knew the pace of work during October to December 2007 would be relentless.

I met up again with the small northern England-based CRO for an informal lunch one day, having nurtured our developing relationship with them slowly over the past 9 months. I had contributed the medical writing section of several full-service proposals for them over the past few months, and had been glad to advise on writing issues when asked. During lunch, business was barely mentioned, and I took their lead and held back. However, I was rewarded at the end of the meal when I was told that they were on the cusp of hearing about several proposals, many of which included medical writing components and that that they would be contracting all writing services to me for all projects in future. This was in effect a 'preferred provider' agreement, going forward. I was starting to appreciate that longer term business objectives may simmer away for a while before coming to fruition—patience was the key.

Closing thoughts...

So that is the end of my first year of trading as a freelance medical writer. The move away from salaried employment has afforded me a better work-life balance, increased flexibility and enhanced financial reward. Before I started my journey, both Paul and I thought that my greatest ongoing worry would be not knowing what was around the corner—I am, after all, one of life's planners. I have succeeded in surprising us both on that score by apparently thriving on the uncertainty. I liken this to my attitude to the organic fruit and vegetable box scheme we subscribe to. From week to week, I don't know what delights the box will offer up, but I always manage to make good, and rarely, if ever find myself furtively composting! This first year has more than anything been a period of self-discovery for me; I hope that you have enjoyed sharing in this, my very personal journey.

Preceding articles in this series are available for reference at: <http://www.samhamiltonmwservices.co.uk/publications.html>

Sam Hamilton

Sam Hamilton Medical Writing Services Limited
Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK
sam@samhamiltonmwservices.co.uk
www.samhamiltonmwservices.co.uk