



A continuing personal account of my first year as a freelance medical writer

by Sam Hamilton

As I progress through my first year in business as a freelance medical writer, I invite you to share my experiences over the last quarter. In previous issues of The Write Stuff (TWS), you heard about my journey to freelance medical writing and my first six months in business. The next three months have required hard work and long hours as contracts have come to fruition. In delivering several high quality documents, I have established relationships with a number of clients which I hope to cement over the coming years. Read how spring and early summer turned out as the business developed apace.

Months 6 to 9

April 2007

By early April, I heard back from Helen in the US. A fellow freelance medical writer and close personal friend, she had been invited to bid for the writing of a programme of early phase protocols for a major pharmaceutical company. She had asked for my counsel during the bidding process and we knew we would be working together for the next 18 months to 2 years in the event of a win. We were both delighted and excited to hear that the bid had been successful. Helen concentrated her efforts on widening her pool of US writers, and I firmed up arrangements with the smaller UK-based writing team which I would be running. We began to investigate setting up contracts which would be legally acceptable on both sides of the Atlantic and options for the exchange of currency with minimal associated costs.

Several writing activities were already underway in early April, including draft reporting on as large a clinical study report (CSR) as I had tackled in 9 years, and updating client comments on a partly completed CSR which had been delayed from January.

The children had two weeks of Easter holidays looming, so with this in mind, I scheduled meticulously to enable a degree of harmony between work and family life. It actually worked pretty well, considering my daughter had different ideas, caught chicken pox and was excluded from school for the last week of term, extending her holiday somewhat! So as to avoid a rapid descent into chaos, I

arranged for her to have a few days with her grandparents as she was not ill at all, just itchy! This enabled me to maintain momentum during that crucial period between statistical output becoming available and the draft report deadline. The output at that stage was based on draft data. My experienced client was entirely pragmatic in their approach to reporting this 'large' study which comprised 20 secondary efficacy variables, and for which we both knew the CSR would eventually turn out to be voluminous. I received draft output and, consequently, a head start with reporting. When the final output eventually arrived in late April, changes to draft data were highlighted, so I simply revised the relevant pre-written sections.

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I made minor revisions to the report for which review of the efficacy section had stalled in January. The safety data continued to be unavailable, so the report still could not be closed out.

We enjoyed some free time and even managed a few days away over the Easter holidays, walking in the beautiful Lake District in the North West of England.

In late April, I attended a networking event for new members of the Healthcare Network North East England (www.hcnetnee.com), a local organisation which works with companies, including those involved in clinical research, to increase sales and market opportunity through networking. I was the only new member present in my field, and most other participants appeared to make components for use in equipment designed to improve the quality of life for physically incapacitated patients. As a result, networking opportunities were a touch thin on the ground for me, so I simply enjoyed the lunch, participated as best I could and learned a little about an area I knew nothing about previously.

I wrote a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for a University-based group overseeing investigator-led clinical research activities in the region.

A large contract I had been negotiating for the past 3 months eventually fell through, due to lack of funding. I accepted and moved on from this more readily than I had

A continuing personal account...

expected, which told me that I had finally begun to think like a seasoned freelancer. I was starting to realise that enquiries come up regularly and new business is often just around the corner, though one might not realise it at the time.

May 2007

May was an extremely busy month for me. I completed the shell of a CSR I had begun preparing in February, as the last of the component documents arrived. Helen was contracted to perform quality control (QC) review of the full report and she did this in two stages, the first being QC of the shell. I was delighted to see that we worked very well together as a team and she worked to the same standard as I expected of myself. A promising partnership was underway! The completed shell was now ready for the results expected later in the month.

I continued to update and revise the large CSR with final data. During this stage of reporting, things became a little more complicated for a number of reasons. The client required my report to stylistically match a report being written internally, concurrent to mine. Myself and my fellow writer shared sections of our reports as we completed them, to ensure some degree of match. However, timing was not perfect, so we knew that some sections would require revision very late in the reporting process. Revised primary analysis coupled with additional analyses in a subgroup of 'interesting' patients added to my workload. However, I submitted the draft report on time in mid-May. The client very reasonably agreed to compensate me for the changes of scope from the originally contracted task.

My accountant, Lynne, forwarded an unexpected incentive payment as a result of her having registered my taxation details online. It was certainly a sum better in the business' coffers than the government's, in my opinion!

I attended 3 days of the EMWA Vienna conference. I arrived somewhat late for the Gala Dinner on the Wednesday evening due to my late incoming flight—perhaps a taste of things to come... I attended the final two courses which would hopefully lead to my foundation accreditation, joint-chaired the Freelance Forum with Alistair Reeves and hosted a lunch discussion table. I met many old friends, made some new friends and generally had a great time. It was a real antidote to the unrelenting pace of the previous couple of months. However, my return home was not quite as straightforward as it should have been, and included a cancelled connecting flight from Paris to Newcastle on Friday afternoon, an enforced overnight stay in Paris and purchase of another flight to get me home before the whole Bank Holiday weekend expired. Having returned home a day late, I then drove determinedly, map

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in hand, to locate my family who were camping deep in the Cumbrian countryside. We spent 4 chilled-out days together before I had to leave them early to resume work.

June 2007

Final output for the smaller CSR arrived a few days ahead of client comments on the large CSR. I worked long hours with the family still away. Helen quality controlled the small report and I ultimately exceeded both reporting deadlines by 3 days. It would be fair to say that by mid-June, I felt very much in need of a change of pace. My client was happy with my efforts on the large report and anticipated further need of my services in future. The smaller report's comments were delayed, possibly until August—a mutually agreeable decision.

I caught up on outstanding actions from the Vienna conference, with the generous help of 4 fellow freelancers, Alistair Reeves, Helen Kulesza, Elaine O'Prey and Linda Liem.

I also set up a currency trading account to facilitate affordable currency exchange between Helen and myself. In setting up a XETrade account (<https://www.xe.com/fx/>), I was able to pay Helen for her QC services direct in dollars electronically transferred to her US account whilst incurring no currency exchange charges whatsoever. Neat!

I prepared PowerPoint presentations for two lectures I was due to give at the University in July. I was grateful to Wendy Kingdom, a seasoned EMWA lecturer and fellow freelancer, who was generous with her time and advice in relation to preparation of one of the lectures.

As previously, a couple of minor pieces of work cropped up, were executed and closed out, all of which brought June to a highly satisfactory conclusion. The summer loomed and I looked forward to a family holiday in the US and a slower pace of life, at least for a couple of months.

I will update you on my fourth quarter in business during my first year of trading, so look out for my final article in the next issue of *TWS*.

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EMWA is currently developing a freelance e-mail user group so that the freelance membership may raise issues for debate between meetings. More information on the list will be available shortly, so watch the website. In addition, due to popular demand, the Freelance Forum will now take place at both the Spring and Autumn conferences from November 2007. We would welcome your feedback on our endeavours to date, so do please join us in Basle (Friday 2 November 2007, 1730-1830) and Barcelona and have your say.