

# The history of *The Write Stuff*: 10 years of bringing European medical writers together

by Barry Drees

Actually, this story starts even before there was a real EMWA, back in 1993. Think of it, where were you in 1993? I had only been a medical writer for 4 years and was working at the German chemical company of Hoechst AG. Bill Clinton had just been inaugurated as president of the USA, the film Jurassic Park (the first one) was setting records in theatres, Benazir Bhutto was elected Prime Minister and became the first woman leader of an Islamic nation, and the fledgling European chapter of the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) put out the first issue of what was known at the time as *'The AMWA Journal Europe'*. It would not even become associated with the name EMWA until 2 years later when its name changed to the rather mundane *'EMWA Newsletter'*. Finally, in 1998, it became *'The Write Stuff—The Journal of the European Medical Writers Association'*. Not exactly a very auspicious beginning for what you now have in your hands.

## The EMWA journal: Milestones

### Spring 1993 - The AMWA Journal Europe:

first publication ever from the association which would eventually become EMWA (twice yearly)

### Summer 1995 - EMWA Newsletter:

first publication containing the concept EMWA (twice yearly)

### Summer 1996 - EMWA Newsletter:

the infamous 'pink' issue

### Summer 1998 - The Write Stuff: the Journal of the European Medical Writers Association:

post-conference Issue: first issue of TWS—it was the first EMWA publication on other than office paper and of more than 8 pages (26 pages!). It was produced 4 times yearly.

### Spring 2000 - The Write Stuff: Education Issue:

first use of a graphic on the cover.

### Summer 2004 - The Write Stuff: Enrichment through Cultural Exchange:

first issue of new Editor-in-Chief, Elise Langdon-Neuner.

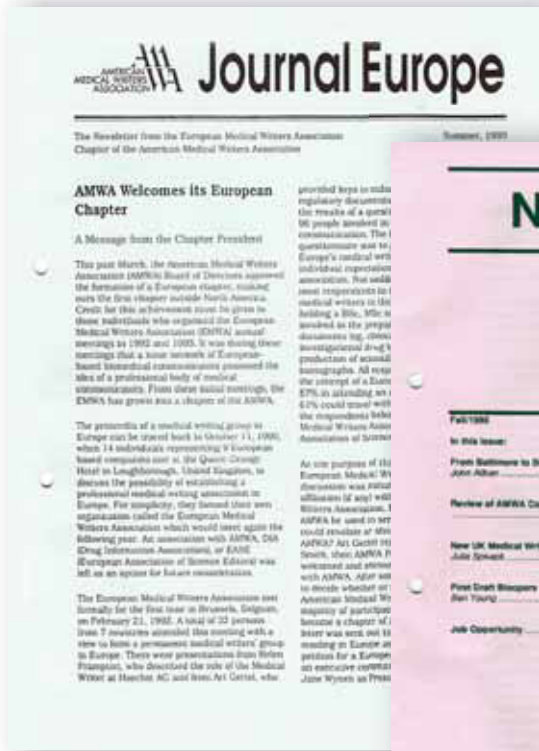
### Spring 2006 - The Write Stuff: Clinical Trials:

first issue in the new format featuring full colour throughout.

I, of course, was the guilty party responsible for the change from what was little more than an office newsletter to something more resembling what we wanted it to be, a journal for the medical writers of Europe. Had I any idea of what it would involve I would never have gone anywhere near the thing (but then isn't that true for just about everything in EMWA?). Like most members, I had never really given our newsletter much thought until Keith Vietch stood up at the AGM in Berlin in May 1996 and told us that he had just accepted "the easiest job in the world", that of being an editor of a newsletter for an association of writers, who presumably would enjoy writing and submitting material. In the first issue he wrote, "... this should be an easy job because all those professional writers out there will be able to provide tons of well-written, easily edited material for inclusion. Go ahead prove me right!". Little did he know. Nevertheless, his first issue started quite ambitiously with a contest to re-name the rather humdrum title, *'EMWA Newsletter'*. A number of entries were considered (WordlyWise, First Draft, The Dossier, The Boiler Plate, Deadlines, Canary Dwarf(?), Missing Link, The Writer's Block, Inkspot, Doublespeak), but perhaps thankfully, none was chosen and *'EMWA Newsletter'* it would remain. The other thing about the early days of the newsletter was that the budget for producing it wasn't 'close to zero' or 'almost zero', it was in fact zero. So the early editors not only had to collect material to fill it, they had to put it all together, print it and mail it (which explains why it looked like it was run off of an office printer—it was). The support of a number of European pharmaceutical companies (knowingly or not!) in donating the employee time, printing and mailing costs were crucial to having any kind of newsletter at all, but clearly were not sustainable as EMWA got larger and more professional. Keith, you and the other early editors (Liz Healing 1993 - 1994; Janice Beck, 1994 - 1995; Keith Vietch, 1995 - 1998) carried the newsletter through the forlorn early days, and I would like to salute your dedication and enthusiasm for what surely was a very difficult and thankless job.

Keith would eventually write in his final issue as editor, "A recurring theme of my scribbles over the past 2 years has been an ardent appeal for more material from the membership. It has always amazed me that an organization composed of people who make their living from writing, often unacknowledged, are not eager to apply their skills to contribute to their own newsletter, and even be openly seen as the author. Perhaps that is where the problem lies, in that we have become so used to being in the background that we do not want to expose ourselves in the public arena."

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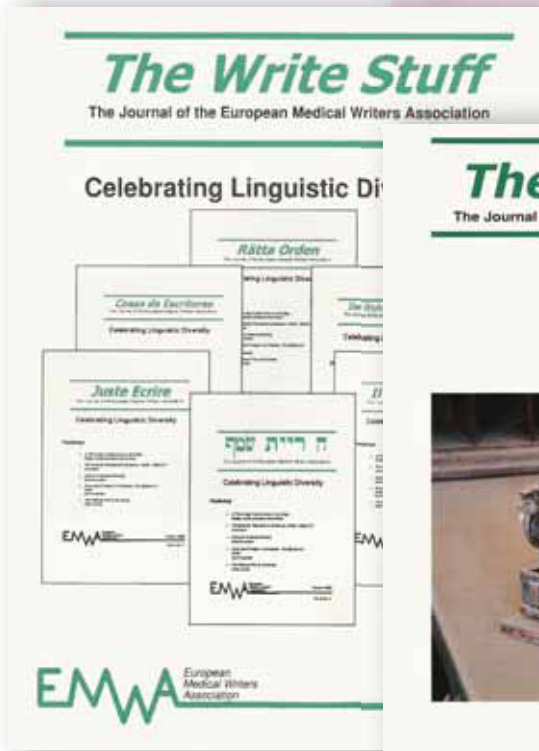
Summer 1993



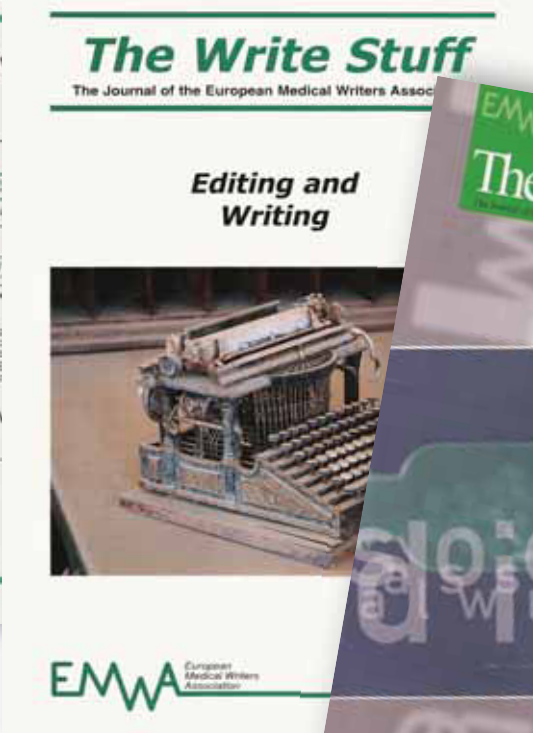
Autumn 1995



Summer 1998



Summer 2000



Autumn 2004



Spring 2006



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When I spoke to him about the newsletter over the next few conferences he repeated the problem with getting people to contribute material. I responded that what we needed was a new look; no one wants to invest time to write for something that looks like you just ran it off of your office printer. I suggested that we needed something glossy, with photos and a proper name. He pointed out that we could hardly put together something like a proper journal when there was nothing to put in it. Glossy paper and photos are all well and good but not if it is empty. He definitely had a point, but this was a vicious circle—it looked shabby because there was nothing to put in it and there was nothing to put in it because it looked shabby.

The next year I was helping the Executive Committee search for a new candidate for Vice-president (in those days always our most difficult task) and I was thinking that Keith would be great (lots of experience and an obvious passion for EMWA), but that we would then need to find a new editor for the newsletter. It occurred to me that if I took over as editor, it would free Keith up for the vice presidency and I could try my hand at getting people to write for the newsletter. Somehow I thought that this would merely involve coming up with cool design ideas and chatting up a few people at the conferences for articles. I couldn't have been more wrong. Nevertheless, I approached the Executive Committee and made them an offer that I would take over the position as editor (referred to by Keith as the 'poisoned cup'), but that they would have to approve some money from the budget for printing and distribution. There was some resistance since this was only EMWA's second expenditure outside of the conferences (Head Office was the first), but with Keith needed as Vice President what could they say?

It was clear that we needed a better looking product. The AMWA journal, for example, was a glossy magazine with photographs. Also, as Keith had realized, we needed a new name. In addition, I wanted to increase the frequency of the Newsletter, twice yearly was simply too infrequent for it to make any kind of impact. I thought that 4 times a year (every 3 months) would keep EMWA in people's minds and that we should expand from 8 pages to about 30. All of this meant, however, that we were going to have to vastly increase the amount of publishable material we were receiving. The question, of course, was how? The changes in format, assuming that the final product was professional, would encourage more people to contribute. I also was fairly sure that if I put some effort into it I could talk more people into writing articles, Lord knows I had had plenty of practice at this being on the EMWA Executive Committee and cajoling people into volunteering their time and talents for the conferences. But 120 pages a year?

The first thing we would have to change would be the scope of what we published. Up until then, the EMWA Newsletter had mainly been involved in reporting EMWA news. While I certainly wanted to continue doing this, it was hardly enough to fill 16 pages a year, let alone 120. So I wanted to expand the scope to include anything of possible interest to medical writers, such as regulatory news, changes in medical practice, and book and website reviews. The second major innovation was to spread the work around a bit. In my experience, you only get things done by making people personally responsible, so I thought that if we created an editorial board, it would get more people involved in all aspects of the journal—in particular, writing and commissioning articles. I wanted a stable of columnists (each had to promise to deliver at least 2 articles a year, either self-



*"Thank goodness you're here—I can't accomplish anything unless I have a deadline."*

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written or commissioned), which would dramatically reduce the amount of new material I needed to come up with for each issue. Thus was born the very first EMWA journal editorial board (Editor-in-Chief, Barry Drees; Artistic Director, Julia Frojanic Klapproth; Copy Editor, Chris Priestley; ‘Meetings of Interest’, Sarah Heritage; and ‘From the Literature’, Liz Wager). Many others came and went over the years, but particularly notable contributors included Adam Jacobs, Judi Proctor, Karen Shashok, Beccy Seward, Susan Quinn, Amanda Bennett, Varsha Imber, Diane Epstein, Patricia Bunz, and Alison McIntosh. Thank you all, you not only made it possible, but it always was a great pleasure working with you.

As for the name, I briefly considered bringing out the new format and then holding a new name competition, but everyone I consulted said that for the biggest ‘BANG’, I should do everything at once. So I asked people for ideas: colleagues, friends, random people on the street, but nothing really seemed to click. Then I happened across an editorial in *The Lancet* entitled, ‘The Write Stuff’ (TWS) (a pun on the expression used in the US space programme for astronaut candidates who survived the training, i.e., they had the ‘right stuff’) and everyone I spoke with in EMWA agreed that this was a winner. An internet search at the time revealed nothing, unlike the 14 million hits now.

I was hoping that our new Head Office would help me with printing, but after suggesting a printer, they left me alone. I was soon to get a lightning education in papers, ink colours, print definition, and other publishing minutiae about which I was woefully ignorant. I shall never forget when I told them that I wanted our only colour (due to the limited budget) to be green, they asked which one, and I said, “Oh sort of middle to dark green”. Of course, they needed to know exactly which one (there are hundreds) and more specifically, what number (I cannot recall precisely, but I believe it was GREEN 238, or something like that). Then it all had to be tried on the various papers we were considering, and so on and on and on.

All this time I was also getting people to write articles, using on all of my contacts at EMWA and calling in every favour I had done anyone over the last 5 years. Finally, at long last, everything went off to the printer and I waited for it to actually arrive on everyone’s desk. One can probably imagine the fear and trembling with which I awaited the verdict of the members: writers, editors, and detail freaks. Would people like it? Would people think it was worth the money? Would they ban me forever from the association for producing such a shoddy journal? So I was quite surprised and immensely satisfied (and relieved) when on the day of delivery, the phone calls and emails started pouring in from enthusiastic members telling me how much they liked it (of course, true to hallowed EMWA tradition, there were a few grouches with complaints). I could sit back and bask in good feeling for an afternoon, but the next morning the realization hit me that we needed another issue in 3 months!

Well, there were many triumphs and tragedies over the next 6 years and 20 issues we put out. There was the infamous blank page (but at least we did not put in the middle ‘This page intentionally left blank’, which would, as *New Scientist* delights in pointing out, have negated itself). We had an international issue where the AMWA Journal, Australian MWA Journal, and *TWS* all simultaneously published articles by the 3 editors on medical writing in their respective regions. I was surprised the first time that articles from *TWS* actually were cited by another journal (*The Journal of the European Society for Regulatory Affairs*; July/August 2000) and even more surprised to receive a phone call from a bookstore in Leipzig, Germany saying that one of their customers had asked them for *TWS* and how could they obtain some for sale? Perhaps most memorable, though, was when several first-published contributors asked for additional copies so that they could give them to their mothers. Interestingly, Keith was to play another important role 2 years later when he suggested over a few beers that we use photos on the cover instead of just the list of articles as we were doing (he said it would be easier to tell one issue from another).

Even from the start, however, I knew that perhaps the truest measure of my achievement in being editor would be how well I could pass the job on to someone else. Many organizations have journals that are edited by one dedicated individual for ages and ages, but which suffer (sometimes terminally) when that person finally moves on (the AMWA journal ceased to exist for one year when the editor suddenly changed jobs and stopped working on it). From the start, I was interested in finding someone to replace me, as I am also a very firm believer in change being a positive force in an organization. Towards that end, I added the position of Deputy Editor to the editorial board in the hope that it would generate people with experience in putting out the newsletter while allowing me to see whether they could handle it. So it was with immense satisfaction that I was able to pass the position on to Elise Langdon-Neuner in 2004 and to watch the incredible job she has done continuing to develop and expand *TWS* and made it her own. She has taken *TWS* to new heights of professionalism and interest of which I hadn’t even dreamed.

As Keith noted back in 1996, an association of writers really should be capable of producing a world-class journal, since it represents what we do for a living. EMWA needs a journal of which it can be proud, and I was thrilled to have been able to be part of it. Even more importantly, though, and this has always been an essential part of the EMWA experience for me, is that through all the hard work and problems, we always had a lot of fun doing it, for what is life for if not for that?

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