

When less is more: Medical writers as guardians of curated content

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Abstract

In this data-driven era, the type and format of publicly available medical and scientific information is significantly changing. Medical writers can serve as guardians of the information entering the public domain by ensuring accuracy and highlighting the most relevant studies for all stakeholders, from pharmaceutical clients to patients. Clinicians often seek information to stay current with new medical developments. New tools are available to present this information, and medical writers are working behind the scenes to make sure it is useful and accurate.

Houston, we have a problem: too much data here!

The quantity of medical and scientific information is constantly increasing: global scientific output doubles every 9 years.¹ It is becoming nearly impossible to keep up.

Importantly, clinicians are expected to stay up-to-date with the latest research outcomes; yet, the increasing amount of new data available makes it difficult. In this context, time-pressed clinicians need easily accessible, brief, and accurate information to allow informed clinical

decision-making.

Medical writers are often asked to curate content, which is defined as the process of gathering information relevant to a particular topic or area of interest. It sounds simple, but as Steve Jobs once said, “Simple can be harder than complex: You have to work hard to get your thinking clean to make it simple.”^{2,3}

Content solutions in the data-driven era

These needs are presently being addressed with the support of scientific content curators. A content curator collects, collates, and summarises the most relevant content published in scientific literature or at scientific congresses; the content curator then shares this information on specialised websites, in newsletters, etc. Table 1 lists some examples of content curators, though many others exist.

Content is usually referred to as being independent when it is not industry supported. Independent content clients are usually not-for-profit associations, organisations, or societies that are run by and for their members. Patient associations and scientific societies are typical examples. Sponsored content is provided with support from industry clients, who have an interest in providing information in therapeutic areas of interest to their end-users such as clinicians or the general public. Governmental bodies also curate scientific information – particularly regulatory drug updates – to inform clinicians about new products and treatment guidelines. Furthermore, pharmaceutical companies may hire individual medical communication agencies or freelance medical writers to curate content being presented live at scientific congresses. This gives companies the most up-to-date information, though these deliverables are rarely available in the public domain. This type of coverage and reporting is regulated under different laws in each country.

What is the role of medical writers?

Importantly, curators can ensure that the articles selected for publication are relevant and of high quality for the reader. Professional medical writers are increasingly in demand for content curation as they are well trained to understand the quality and relevance of the research. Those medical writers with scientific training and experience writing publications are well placed to ensure the information is critically analysed before reaching the reader. As well as solid writing and summarising skills, most experienced medical writers also have specialist medical knowledge, and a good understanding of best publishing practices and ethics. They also have a unique and personal understanding of the audience, since many medical writers were scientists or clinicians.

Different projects for medical writers

The deliverables for content curation can vary. Typically, the most important information needs to be identified and summarised in one or two key points. This can be quite a challenge! Writers may need to identify why this information is

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important, but also describe key study design elements, highlight the key results and their significance, and also note any study limitations. To ensure the content can be digested by time-pressed readers, some providers request that this be presented in no more than 200–300 words. Other providers ask for a journalistic style with the key information upfront and details following.

For medical congresses, clients may ask that the key findings be reported as a scientific press release (e.g. the style you can see at Univadis.com), a slide deck, a combination of the two, or something else entirely! Companies (and medical writers) are increasingly creative with how they present key findings to make the reading experience easier for their clients.

Scientific journals also have blog posts, which



are usually a lot easier to read than full articles. Medical writers may be responsible for summarising publications and delivering a brief text in the form of a blog post.

Communicating to the right audience

The needs of clinicians in practice are quite distinct from the needs of students, researchers, or the general public.⁴ Clinicians usually seek brief and accurate information for two reasons: to stay current with new developments in medicine relevant to their practice, or to find answers to patient-specific questions.⁵ With a full schedule, clinicians often have no time for reading new scientific literature. On the other hand, patients, students, and researchers may also want to know the latest developments. When summarising clinical research for patients, writers need to simplify the language and sentence structure so that articles are easy to read and understand, while key results are retained in context. So how do medical writers do this?

Medical writers can ask themselves the following questions to tailor texts to different audiences:

[For clinicians]

- Does this publication/abstract/poster/talk target the needs of clinicians? Did the researchers study outcomes that clinicians would be interested in?
- Where was the study performed, at which trial centres, and were there country- or ethnic-specific patient populations?
- How did the researchers interpret the results?
- Does the study answer the research question?
- Is the patient population in the study similar to the patient population that they treat?
- Is the intervention feasible for the population?
- Will the research finding have an impact on patient care?
- Does the study add new information to treatment algorithms?
- Does the study challenge current treatment guidance or present off-label use or both?
- Does the presentation describe novel endpoints that challenge current practice?⁶
- Were the research methods appropriate for the study question?
- Does the journal/congress/website present all the information accurately?

- Who funded the study? A pharmaceutical company or an independent group?

[For patients]

- Did the researchers study outcomes that patients would be interested in?
- Where was the study performed, at which trial centres, and were there country- or ethnic-specific patient populations?
- Does the study show a better quality of life for patients?
- Does the study suggest that patients can have more control over their own disease or condition?
- How did the researchers interpret the results?
- Who funded the study? A pharmaceutical company or an independent group?

A trend on the rise for medical writers

With the increasing demand for brief, summarised, up-to-date information, medical writers should be concentrating their efforts on providing comprehensive services for their audiences. Not only are dozens of articles curated

Table 1. Examples of clinical content curators

Organisation or journal	Details	Frequency, format, and language
Independent curators		
European Society of Medical Oncology	European professional organisation for medical oncology, comprising over 20,000 oncology professionals from over 150 countries	Online access and regular newsletters; publish approximately 4–7 unique articles per week Language: English
ESMO.org	ESMO is a non-profit publisher of oncology news that ensures clinicians are kept up-to-date with the latest developments affecting them and their daily practice.	
American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) ASCO.org	ASCO Daily News provides scientific and educational summaries from oncology conferences and oncology news to ASCO members and oncology healthcare providers. Editorial content is designed to further the education and increase the quality of patient care.	ASCO Daily News is a print and online newspaper. Language: English
Local scientific societies	Some examples: seom.org	Publish weekly summaries of scientific literature and news in local languages
Private curators		
Medscape	Medscape is the leading online global destination for physicians and healthcare professionals worldwide, offering: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the latest medical news and expert perspectives. • essential point-of-care drug and disease information. • relevant professional education and continuing medical education. • country-specific sites and free continuous medical education credits. 	Publish daily summaries and online content Language: English
Univadis.com	A free, time-saving medical news and education platform for healthcare professionals. Executive summaries aim to keep clinicians up-to-date in just a few minutes each day.	Approximately 250 unique articles per week across all topics, written in English and translated into several languages or written in local languages Languages: Chinese, Dutch, English, German, French, Greek, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Spanish
www.sciencedaily.com	ScienceDaily features breaking news about the latest discoveries in science, health, the environment, technology, and more – from leading universities, scientific journals, and research organisations.	Daily email digest Language: English
www.medpagetoday.com	MedPageToday is a trusted and reliable source for clinical and policy coverage that directly affects the lives and practices of health care professionals in the USA. Medical meeting coverage Free continuous medical education credits	Daily headlines Language: English
https://www.m3medical.com/	M3 Medical is a new online medical community for healthcare professionals in Europe, Asia and the USA designed to enable members to interact with their peers, collaborate, and gain access to high quality and relevant information and knowledge to support their clinical practice and professional lives. Conference diary, conference coverage, blogs, and social networks	Daily email digest of healthcare and medical news on an American and European site in English, French, German, Italian, Spanish

Continued opposite

Government agencies		
AIFA – Italian Regulatory Agency, AEMPS – Spanish Regulatory Agency.	Summaries of evidence-linked and validated drug updates, and practice guidelines	Monthly online updates Local languages: Italian; Spanish
National Health Service UK www.nhs.uk	An award-winning website for the general public in the UK, providing independent health news and information from recent scientific literature. Topics include common illnesses such as cancer, diabetes, neurology, and lifestyle issues.	Daily online update in English
Victoria state government Australia www2.health.vic.gov.au	An award-winning website for the general public in the UK, providing independent health news and information from recent scientific literature. Topics include common illnesses such as cancer, diabetes, neurology, and lifestyle issues.	Daily online update in English
INSERM médecine/sciences (m/s) www.medicinesciences.org	An international multidisciplinary publication focused on biology, medicine, and health research. m/s is a French scientific publication that started more than 30 years ago	Regular online updates, thematic issues, and special editions in French Language: English and French

every week in English, they are also being translated or written directly in local languages. This implies new opportunities for medical writers and also for medical translators.

Conflicts of interest

LCCA, JLJ and AW have received consultancy fees from Aptus Health International (Univadis), though not relevant to this work.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Barbara Grossman and Marian Hodges for their invaluable review of this article and their dedication.

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