Careers Beyond Academia: Medical Writing

Dr. Caroline Ritchie is the founder and owner of Ritchie Scientific Consulting, LLC, where she supports several pharmaceutical companies with their regulatory submissions. In this informational interview, Dr. Ritchie describes what medical writing is all about and shares her journey after her postdoc to a successful medical writer. She also shares some tips and resources that will help future Medical Writers and other professionals (www.scientificphd-nowwhat.com),

1. My professional background

I have a BS in chemistry, a PhD in molecular biophysics, and just finished my MBA. After completing my PhD, I did a very brief stint as a postdoc while I was waiting for my husband to finish his PhD. During that time, I spent every free hour doing some (unpaid or very low paid) freelance editing, scientific writing, and other nonfiction writing. Once my husband was close to finishing, I started looking for medical writing jobs, focusing my job search in the Boston area. Eventually, I was offered a position as a Senior Medical Writer in the Scientific Communications group at a large medical device company. I worked there for 2.5 years, during which I was promoted to a managerial position and had 3 direct reports. I later switched gears and joined a pharmaceutical company to do regulatory writing. During that time, I realized that I really enjoyed the strategy that comes with regulatory writing, but did not see a future at that company. After only 9 months, I left to start my own company, Ritchie Scientific Consulting, LLC, where I support several pharmaceutical companies in their regulatory submissions.

2. What is Medical Writing?

There are several different types of medical writing (sometimes with different titles), but I will focus on regulatory writing, as that is the type of work I spend most of my time doing. Regulatory medical writers work very closely with cross-functional teams to support clinical trial activities and drug development. During regulatory submissions (eg, INDs, NDAs, BLAs), regulatory writers drive the development of many of the required documents. Most of these documents are data-heavy and require understanding of the disease, the statistical output, regulations, and the company's strategy.

3. Why I chose Medical Writing as a career

Writing is always something that I was quite good at, and I really found that I enjoyed writing (especially scientific writing) during my undergraduate years. I talked to a lot of people during graduate school who worked as medical writers and was encouraged at how exciting of a career it can be. In my first position in scientific communications, I had the opportunity to write some documents that are typically handled by regulatory writers (clinical trial protocols and clinical study reports). I really enjoyed these long and complex documents, and the strategy needed to design an appropriate study and then communicate those results within a structured format. It is very rare to find positions that involve both publication writing and regulatory writing, so it was a unique opportunity that allowed me to easily transition into a regulatory-focused role.

4. Getting the first job

It is never easy transitioning from academia into industry, and it took me longer than I hoped to make the transition. I had some freelance editing and writing to include in my resume, which I knew would set me apart from other applicants who were straight out of graduate school/postdoc positions. However, I was also a non-local candidate, which I knew would serve as an additional barrier. I applied to a large number of positions. I focused my job search on roles in scientific communications, as I knew that my experience writing papers and presenting my research at conferences would translate well into that type of role. I felt confident that if I could at least speak to the hiring manager, I would have a chance, but it was difficult just getting past that hurdle. While I had some informational interviews during my brief time as a postdoc, I should have invested more time and energy into networking. I have learned now how critical networking is, and have made growing/maintaining my network a top priority.

5. Transitioning from a Researcher to a Medical Writer

Understanding corporate lingo was a huge challenge. I also did not realize how strategic publications coming from industry are and the various guidelines that must be followed to ensure transparency. Authorship, journal/conference selection, and timing of publications are all important strategic components that are planned sometimes years in advance. Further transitioning into regulatory writing was even more challenging as there are many regulations (dependent on region), all of which evolve over time. Even though there are regulations and guidances for the structure of regulatory documents, every company does things differently. It is always a challenge once you become accustomed to doing something a certain way, then having to re-learn how it is done with another company. The corporate environment is very different from the academic environment, but each company is very different.

6. My typical day

As a medical writing consultant, I really do not have a typical day beyond trying to work semi-normal work hours. Lately I have been working on a submission in Japan, and I am regularly leading conference calls from my home office at 7:00 am to accommodate team members in Europe and Tokyo. Usually I spend about half of my working hours in meetings and the other half actually writing. In addition to writing, I set up reviews for cross-functional teams to review my documents, prepare for key messaging meetings, and review others' documents. My days are very interactive, even now that I work mostly from home. I am on the phone, on Skype calls, and instant messaging people throughout the day. I also go into my clients' offices on occasion for important meetings. I lead a ton of meetings and interact with a lot of people. Medical writing is definitely not the solitary career that it seems.

7. Challenges of a Medical Writer

Regulatory writing, in particular, can pose long working hours, especially during a submission. The time from detailed planning to approval of a regulatory submission can easily be 1.5 years or longer, with some months busier than others. During rapid response rounds from health authorities, I have worked 15+ hour days on occasion and had Saturday morning conference calls more often than I would like. Working with submissions outside of the US can require atypical working hours to accommodate the different times zones of stakeholders. Because I have my own company, I can balance out those long weeks or crazy hours, with some shorter days or long weekends. This is much more difficult when you work directly for a company. Another challenge is finding the right company to work for. Some companies view medical writers as strategic content experts, while a few treat

medical writers more as administrators. I refuse to work for companies of the latter type. It is very important during a job interview to assess the role and perception of medical writing within the organization and to get a feel for whether the job meshes with your ideal role and professional goals.

8. What I like about Medical Writing

I love the feeling of leading a successful submission and finally receiving approval. An NDA or BLA is a huge undertaking, yet it is such a rewarding process for a team to go through together (assuming you like who you work with). I particularly enjoy the strategic aspect of regulatory writing and trying to get inside the head of a regulatory reviewer. I find that I use the skills I gained during my PhD on a daily basis, and can provide substantial contributions to companies. Since becoming a medical writer, I have become a lot less shy/more assertive, and have really enjoyed the teamwork and interactions that are required in a medical writing career.

9. Words of advice for future Medical Writers

If you are trying to get your first job as a medical writer, make sure it is clear in your resume/cover letter why you are interested in medical writing. Doing a postdoc is not going to increase your chances of getting that first job, so try to get your foot in the door as early as possible. In fact, the longer someone has been in a postdoc position, the less serious they seem about wanting to pursue a non-research career in my experience in hiring. The perception that medical writing is your back-up career plan will hurt you.

Prepare an online portfolio (either on your LinkedIn profile or create a website) as a personal branding tool. Write as much as possible and have writing samples that have not been edited by professional editors (ie, not scientific journal articles). If you have to write content specifically for this purpose, do it.

As a medical writer, work hours can be very long, so make sure to take time for yourself. Exercise, eat right, and try to enjoy the weekends. Also, make sure to set boundaries so that coworkers do not think you are constantly available by phone/email.

- Vidisha Raje, PhD
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