Writing for patients

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Many opportunities – great demand!

- Public is hungry for reliable information about their health
- Not many good scientific writers with a medical background in India
- Many doctors cringe when reading articles on health in the press
- I could've written that much better...
So why don’t more doctors fill this void?

- Doctors are experts
- Have lots of health information
- Have a duty to educate their patients
- Patient education is key to improving public health
I've got all the words I need for my novel, it's just a case of putting them in the right order now!
Is writing hard work?

- Hangover from school days
- Essays on boring topics
- When you write about what you know a lot about and enjoy, writing can be fun!
New skill to learn!

• You are smart – you can do this! You have mastered many skills in the past successfully!
• Practise, practise, parctise
• It’s worth it!
• Writing is hard work – but having written is fun!
The 6 faithful tools of a writer

• Why ?
• What ?
• Where ?
• When ?
• Whom ?
• How ?
Why?

• Prestigious to be an author!
• You are the expert on health – an area of perennial interest for everyone!
• Will also help you learn a lot!
  "Reading makes a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man."
Why?

- Help you become a better doctor – communicate better with your patients, because you understand the importance of words
- Help you become more empathetic
Why?

- Improve the image of the medical profession
- Docere = teach!
- Give Indian medicine a higher profile!
- Become rich 😊
Long and glorious tradition

* Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) - Russian playwright
  * Michael Crichton (born 1942) - American author of Jurassic Park.
* Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930) - British author of Sherlock Holmes fame.
* John Keats (1795-1821) - English poet
* W. Somerset Maugham (1874-1965) - British novelist and short story writer
HOW TO HAVE A BABY
OVERCOMING INFERTILITY
Benefits

• Get more patients – direct self-referrals with no “middle-man”
• Well-informed patients with realistic expectations. Consultations are much easier and quicker
• I give them a copy of the book after the consultation
Benefits

• Saves me time
• Established as an expert in this field
• Get patients from all over the world, since the book is available online free
Personal benefits of writing

• **Learn a lot!** You need to be very clear about your own ideas in order to be able to explain them.

• **Learn to see things from the patient’s point of view** - become empathetic.

• **Keeping a journal** can help you cope better with the stresses of life!
"I try to write a little bit every day."
How do you start?

- Start small – aim big!
- Write daily – polish your skills!
- Daily discipline
- Keep a blog
Where?

- **Print**
  - Newspaper/ magazine Column
- **TV**
- **Books**
- **Blogs**
- **Websites**
• The media
  • High profile job
  • Tight deadlines
• Self-publishing
  • Patient education brochures
  • Blogs
Patient education brochures

- Educate your patients
- Promote your practise
- Saves time
- Protect yourself from litigation
- Helps patients to have realistic expectations
• The internet has changed all the rules!
• Self-publishing is cheap
• Anyone can do it – no entry barriers
• Global audience!
• Can cater to niche audiences
• No space limits
Blogs

• Why should doctors blog?
• How to do it?
  • www.blogger.com
• Who reads your blog?
Health information systems of tomorrow

Health information systems today suffer from a number of significant problems. Challenges which need to be met by the systems of tomorrow include:

- Support for a life-long health record
- True interoperability among all parties and systems used in patient care
- Intelligent decision support
- Domain size and rate of change
- Systems obsolescence
- Multi-contact healthcare system and mobile patients
- Multiple medical cultures, including developing world, asian
- Support for domain experts to have direct control over the information design and change management of their systems

This document discusses the challenges for health information systems of the (immediate) future, and offers some suggestions for how the work of both standards bodies and implementation efforts might be brought together in the form of global standards for health information systems, particularly EHR (electronic health record; note that in this document, the term EHR is used to mean all variants, e.g.
What?

- Write about what people want to know
- News
- Topical
- Write what you are an expert about – do your homework!
Write about your patients!

- Stories – very patient has a story
- Learn to become curious – you will enjoy medicine much more, and also learn a lot about life
- Dictate them!
- Collaborate!
The writer’s tools

- Read a lot!
- Write, write, write!
- Rewrite, rewrite, rewrite!
When?

- Now!
- Never too late – or too early!
How to write

• Brainstorming
• Prewriting
• Writing
• Revising
• Editing
• Feedback!
Brainstorming

• Immerse yourself
• Keep a diary (or use your mobile for voice memos)
• Capture ideas
• The fieldstone method
• Learn from others
Brainstorm

- Don’t rule anything out—great writing ideas often come from creative thinking.
- Use the web!
Prewrite

- Once you have an idea, jot down everything you know about the topic.
- Use a mind map.
No Professional Training/Degrees

- Clergy
  - "Bishop's license" allowed them to practice medicine

- Midwives
  - Dispensed medicine at home

- Gentlefolk
  - Calling quacks, empiricks

- Surgeons/barbers
  - United in guild until 1745, then separated training?

- Physicians
  - Students = sons of gentry and non-gentry
  - Un. of Edinburgh, Oxford, Cambridge
  - Hands-on training - dissection, infirmary, texts in English

18th-Century Medical Practitioners

- Anyone trying to earn a buck

Professional Training/Degrees

Ministered to the poor (traditional arrangement)

Not allowed to use forceps (only physicians could)
Write

• After your ideas are captured, you’re ready to write the first draft.
• Write without worrying about grammar, syntax, punctuation or spelling.
• Spill your guts out! Get what you want to say down on paper.
Revise

- Take a break. Then, return with fresh eyes to make changes.
- Incubate – allow to simmer and cook!
Edit

• When you are satisfied with the ideas, it’s time to get technical.
• Check your spelling, grammar and punctuation!
How to write – a recap!

• Mind Maps
• Become a sponge
• Write all your thoughts down
• Re-write and revise
• Let it incubate for a few days
• Edit
KISS!

- No medicalese
- Simple English
- Use graphics
- Short, clear sentences
- Use a Q and A format – FAQs
- Write like you talk
- Break it up – small paragraphs
- Boxes for highlights
• The most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words when one will do. Thomas Jefferson
KISS

• Keep sentences short
• Keep to one main idea per sentence
• Avoid pretensions, gobbledygook and jargon
• Change long and difficult words to short and simple words
• Prefer active verbs and the active voice
• Cut wordiness
• Get right to the point - and stay there.
Learn from the newspapers

- Newspapers are experts at communicating
- Learn from them
- May not be “stylish” – but it’s very effective
- Masters at clever packaging!
Useful books

• Guidebook to Better Medical Writing
• Richard Asher’s Talking Sense
• Familiar Medical Quotations
• Books written for patients – and by patients
Useful websites

- www.studentBMJ.com
- http://www.amwa.org
  - American Medical Writers Association
- http://www.becomingamedicalwriter.com/
- http://www.physicianpublishing.com/
- http://www.whitesmoke.com/
Medicalese

- Medicalese, a language only remotely related to English.
- Plain English translations

- Abdomen = belly
- Acute = sudden
- Accumulation = buildup
- Viscera = internal organs
What a refreshing contrast!

- "The cumulative risk for the development of protein-losing enteropathy was 13.4% (with confidence limits of 30% to 70%) among 30-day survivors, and 5-year survival decreased from 81% to 73% (p = 0.006). Hemodynamic studies done coincident with the diagnosis have shown increased systemic venous pressure, decreased cardiac index, increased pulmonary vascular resistance, and increased ventricular end-diastolic pressure."

- "One in ten early survivors of the operation run a risk of losing protein in their stools. This problem causes fewer patients to live beyond five years after surgery. These patients have raised pressure in their veins; their hearts pump weakly; their lung blood vessels resist flow of blood through them; and even when relaxed, their ventricles have a higher pressure - all these indicate poor heart activity."
DO YOU HAVE AN IDEA FOR YOUR STORY YET?

NO, I'M WAITING FOR INSPIRATION.

YOU CAN'T JUST TURN ON CREATIVITY LIKE A FAUCET. YOU HAVE TO BE IN THE RIGHT MOOD.

WHAT MOOD IS THAT?

LAST-MINUTE PANIC.
Real-life problems

- The world of publishing is a different world – have to learn the ropes!
- Players
- Decision-makers
- Deadlines
- Budgets
Published but unread poet

© Original Artist

Joseph Farris
Writing a book

- Writing is easy – publishing is much harder
- Marketing is key!
- Huge opportunity – market is still immature in India
Trap #1: You know everything

- Your knowledge of medicine maybe phenomenal.
- You may not know enough about how to present your material in a way that will interest and inform your reader.
- Need to learn!
Trap #2. You know nothing

- Most doctors don’t have a clue about the world of book publishing or writing.
- Humility is fine, but you can always learn!
- Become knowledgeable about book publishing if you are serious about being an author.
Trap #3: You need 5 to 10 years to write a book.

- Most books on health topics for non-medical people are about 200 pages. That's about 20 pages per topic if you divide the subject into 10 or 12 chapters.
Trap #3: You need 5 to 10 years to write a book.

- If you give yourself a month for the first draft of each chapter, that comes down to only four or five pages a week.
- You should be able to finish your book within 12 months.
- You don’t have to cover everything – your book need not be an encyclopedia!
Some “hot” titles

- 101 Mistakes Cancer Patients Make and How to Avoid Them
- 25 Tips for Getting the Best Care from Your Doctor
- How to Think Like a Physician
- Don't Let Your Medicines Kill You
- How to Tell if You Really Need Surgery
- When the Doctor is Wrong
• Collaboration
• Team up with a writer – this can be a winning combination!
• Doctor plus ghostwriter
• Lots of online tools to do so
• Indian doctors have a lot to share with others – please do so!

• Especially true for doctors in teaching hospitals – this is a privilege and a duty!
Editor vs Writer
Think like an Editor -

Understand the publication’s particular focus and format.

Who is the magazine’s ideal reader?
Think like an Editor -

Do your research.

Talk to several top experts and cite credible research to back up what they say. Editors are increasingly skeptical about health claims and don’t want articles to read like advertorials.
Dealing with rejection
Time management is as important as knowledge

- The difference between a writer and everybody else is that the writer has finished.
- Needs planning: work out in advance what you want to say and to whom.
- Set out a deadline so you won't be able to wait until it is perfect: it never will be.
- You can always polish your next edition!
Think like your reader!

- A good writer respects his reader
- Do your work so your reader will not have to!
- “Easy reading is damned hard writing!”
Getting the content right is only half the battle

Presenting your writing in such a way that your audience reads and understands it is harder than just getting the facts right.

Know your audience!

Then spend time researching what kind of writing has worked for that audience in the past.
Don’t underestimate the patient’s intelligence!

- As Ogilvy said, “The customer isn’t a moron. She is your wife. “
- Imagine the reader is your mother – or your son!
- Highly motivated
- Have lots of time
- Are capable of understanding – if we allow them to!
Patients are a huge untapped healthcare resource!

- We need to get patients actively involved in the health care system
- Information Therapy is powerful medicine!
• Major market opportunity for the medical editor who is also an entrepreneur
• Making medicine more understandable for the patient
• Good example of this is the newsletter, “Pediatrics for Parents”
Hard work!

Need

• Self discipline
• New skills

All worth it!
• We need to demystify medicine and get doctors off their pedestal!
• Let’s put patients back at the center of the medical universe!