

BELS *Letter*

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AMWA Revisited: Different Strokes for Different Folks

Issue 23

Winter 2001

The AMWA annual conference succeeded once more in providing fresh and useful materials for its diverse membership (medical writers and editors in education, the pharmaceutical industry, the freelance sector, government, the media, public relations).

To satisfy my own special interest in electronic publishing, I scanned the conference program for presentations, workshops, and other sessions on electronic communication. Here is what I found:

1) Presentations: Electronic Repositories for Biomedical Communication; Using the Internet to Communicate Your Health Care Message; The Virtual Office: Making the Technology of the 21st Century Work for You.

2) Workshops: The Basics of Web Site Design, Bibliographic Software Basics, Current Trends in Print and Electronic Publishing, Using the Internet for Effective Medical Research, Bibliographic Resources for Medical Communicators, Web Site Design for Experienced Designers.

3) Other related sessions: From Paper to PC to Web: the CancerNet Paradigm for Providing Expert Medical Content Online; Electronic Submissions to the FDA: Impact and Role of Pharmaceutical Writers; Internet Resources: Sorting the Wheat from the Chaff; The Daily (Electronic) Grind; Regulatory Aspects of the Internet; Writing for the Electronic Medium; Writing for the Internet: an Exercise in Nonlinear Creativity; Creating an Effective Web Site: Content, Design, and Navigation; Managing a Virtual Team—Out of Sight but Not Out of Mind.



Of the main presentations on electronic publishing, I found "Electronic Repositories for Biomedical Communication" the most useful. The session, chaired by Nancy Taylor, ELS, (Greenville Hospital System), provided a history of electronic repositories (with a good overview of BioMed Central) and an outline of the anticipated consequences of storing research materials in such repositories. The two main speakers, Pritpal S. Tamber (assistant editor, BioMed Central) and Addeane Caellegh (editor,

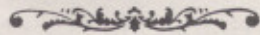
Academic Medicine), led an informative discussion about how electronic distribution of research materials will change the way readers retrieve and use these materials.

A well-attended special forum on the "virtual office," chaired by Crystal Beecher (Electronic Publications Joint Commission Resources), had two presenters: Thomas Gegeny, ELS, (Center for AIDS) and Richard Goldbeck (Aerotek Scientific Staffing). The presenters discussed the technical tools needed to support an office whose members are working from different locations. This forum could have been expanded to include more information on the special managerial tools needed to deal with this increasingly common working environment. Other special sessions addressed electronic communication issues of interest to various groups. The value of these sessions is mostly in bringing up points or questions that, depending on the audience's interest or participation, can be developed into full presentations.

As always, the AMWA workshops were current and extremely valuable, especially to members who are beginning new electronic ventures or who find themselves increasingly involved in Web issues. For veteran AMWA members, the challenge is to continue to look for updated workshops and one-time or new offerings. For organizers of future AMWA conferences, the

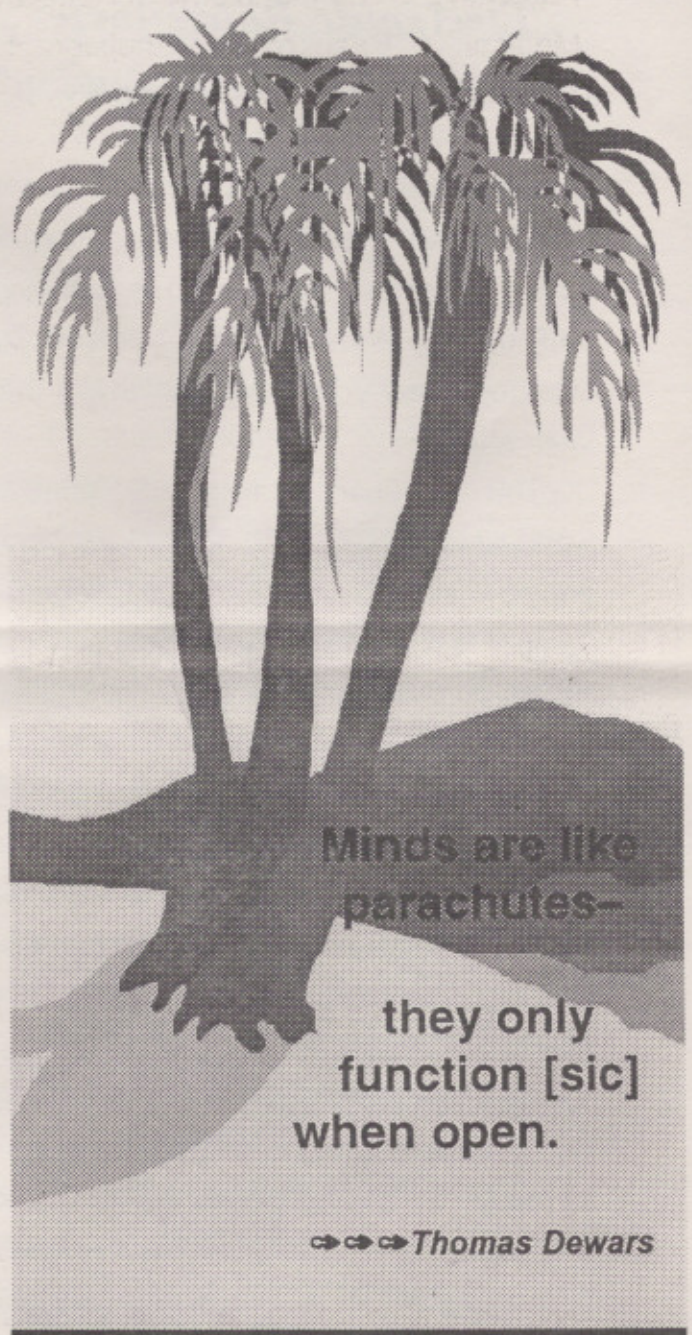
challenge will be to devote more time and attention to electronic issues and address them in greater detail as these issues continue to permeate an even larger part of medical communication.

 Poly Potter, ELS 



BELS Breakfast Useful and Productive

Kathy Loudon graciously agreed to undertake the task of coordinating the BELS networking breakfast, held during the AMWA conference (and providing this blurb). The Indigo Restaurant at the Hotel Inter-Continental was the venue for this meeting. Fifteen members attended the breakfast, and discussions ranged from what type of work the editors do to whether they edit on computer or hard copy. Karen Klein, from Winston-Salem, NC, commented that it is really nice to meet outside of the BELS annual meeting (which is held in conjunction with the annual CSE meeting). Chris Wogan, from Houston, TX, agreed, saying that it is good to have an opportunity to meet with different people. All in all, according to Poly Potter, from Atlanta, GA, members had useful and productive discussions.



**AMWA Editing/Writing
Plenary Session:
"Electronic Repositories
for Biomedical Information"**

This interesting plenary session focused on how dissemination of biomedical information is changing and on the repercussions caused by changes already in place and those that loom ahead.

The first speaker, Pritpal S. Tamber, works at BioMed Central, a "dotcom" company owned by Current Science Group. Dr. Tamber first reviewed the sometimes conflicting purposes of the somewhat confusing entities PubMed, PubMed Central, and BioMed Central.

PubMed is the search engine of the United States' National Library of Medicine (NLM). It contains more than 11 million citations, which come from these five sources:

- 1) MEDLINE: That workhorse database no doubt familiar to BELS members.
- 2) pre-MEDLINE: Articles in the MEDLINE database not yet assigned MeSH search terms. Tagging of search terms can take up to 3 months; this repository gives searchers more up-to-date access to the literature.
- 3) HealthSTAR: A search engine for

health-services research articles with sources of information including MEDLINE.

4) Research from publishers, selected by the NLM, but not destined for MEDLINE (see below).

5) PubMed Central, the full-text variant of the NLM's sources. This grew out of former NIH head Harold Varmus's "e-biomed" proposal.

The NLM reviews citations and decides whether they should go into MEDLINE with the aim of making the database both broad and practical. Hence, citations are chosen for geographical and specialty balance. However, if the NLM decides that some articles are good enough to get into MEDLINE but that MEDLINE is already "full" in that area, the articles are put directly into PubMed. Some critics believe that journals create "barriers" to accessing their texts. The "e-biomed" idea sought to address this conception by, in effect, making NIH a "publisher", that is, publishing new work and providing electronic links to the previous work so that a searcher of information need go only to one site.

Dr. Tamber then described BioMed Central and explained how it differs from other repositories. The founders of BioMed Central sought to overcome three problems based, as Tamber put it, in "the sociology of medicine": permanence, visibility of citations, and career issues (credibility

of the source, the role of high-impact, long-established journals). BioMed Central's staff are trying to address credibility by having submitted material peer reviewed and publishing most medical reviews on-line, a big departure from the secrecy of conventional peer review. However, as of this writing, only 58 articles have been submitted; 10 have been rejected and 15 have been accepted into 11 specialty journals. The remainder are currently being peer reviewed. Once accepted, these articles go directly to PubMed Central. Why would authors choose this still unconventional route? According to Dr. Tamber, an important reason is that BioMed Central has no "publication bias"—they don't reject negative or confirmatory studies or reports of only regional interest. And, of course, the speed of publication is far greater—weeks instead of months—because peer review is conducted entirely on-line.

The concept of peer review for e-journals is an important one if such ventures are to have legitimacy. It is still up for debate whether reviewer accountability (i.e., lack of anonymity) improves the quality of peer review. Ultimately, BioMed Central, as the publisher, is responsible for the material its site contains. Perhaps the openness of electronic publishing will become more accepted in biomedicine; it is already well established in fields like physics. Dr. Tamber pointed out that e-publishing

allows commentary and revision of "pre-publication" texts and "articles" in a far more timely (and less restrictive) fashion than a conventional letters-to-the-editor section, potentially enhancing the information's dissemination and relevance to the scientific community. But a difference exists between the worlds of the researcher and of the clinician. Dr. Tamber also pointed out that it is not optimal for the media or patients to have access to medical information that has not yet been peer-reviewed. Furthermore, having information on-line does not give health care providers more time to learn new information, only more places in which to look for it and less time to do so.

Some material on PubMed Central comes directly from the publishers and is "screened" only for potential libel or legal issues—essentially a preprint. Some conventional journals accessible via PubMed Central include *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *BMJ*, and *Current Science* journals. (Note: these can also be accessed without a subscription via the journals' own Web sites or via PubMed.)

Dr. Tamber's final comments touched on the bottom line: who pays for this new availability? BioMed Central plans eventually to charge for review articles accessed at their site; for now, BioMed Central is, he says, "a struggling dotcom like all the rest".

This was the point of departure for Addeane Caelleigh's philosophical discussion on how the "landscape" of biomedical publishing has changed. The conventional journal processes of peer review, editing, printing, distributing, buying, and archiving still exist in the world of the e-journal, but they may not look the same or be done by separate employees or companies. This situation mirrors the "multiple personality" of the person in academic publishing, who could be an editor, writer, academic society member, or library user, separately or simultaneously. Do that person's needs change depending on what "personality" is in play? And do some of those "personalities" accrue different costs in accessing information in this new landscape? Quite possibly.

Caelleigh reminded the audience that although downloading free text from journals is seductively attractive, it begs the point of who will pay for this convenience. If subscribers no longer buy journals, will publishers need to charge for the review process, for example, to meet their costs? If societies can no longer afford to publish journals (because they have been pressured into giving their journals away free on-line), will that narrow the playing field to publishers with deeper pockets? And we must not forget production costs—people, software, rent, and utilities still must be paid, even if no paper is involved. Will



users pay each time they access a site and get a bill, like buying merchandise with a credit card? Or only each time they print something from the site? Or will charges be based on time spent on-line, as was done in the early days of electronic repositories?

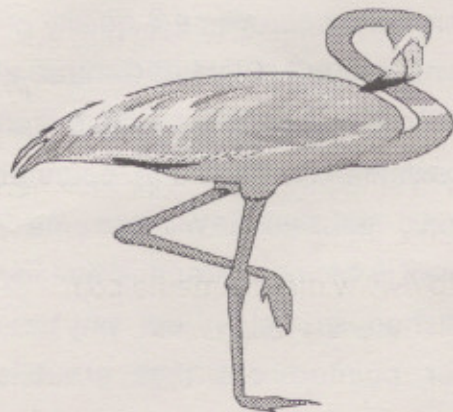
Caelleigh reminded the audience, "We have met the future, and it is us." Plenty of food for thought was provided in this plenary session, and no doubt these issues will concern us for some time to come.

For more information see
BioMed Central:
<http://biomedcentral.com>

PubMed Central:
<http://pubmedcentral.nih.gov>

Caelleigh A. PubMed Central and the new publishing landscape: Shifts and trade-offs. *Acad Med* 2000;75:4-10

 Karen Potvin Klein, ELS 





❶ Congratulations to **Walter Pagel, ELS(D)**, for being elected the 2001 winner of the John P. McGovern Award of the Southwest chapter of AMWA for contributions to medical communications. A great deal of the award has to do with Pagel's work with the Board of Editors in the Life Sciences and the rest of it for overseeing the training of many, many editors.

❷ In September 2000, **Kathleen Lyle, ELS**, stood down after a four-year term as chair of the Society of Freelance Editors and Proofreaders (SFEP). She was awarded honorary membership in the society at the annual general meeting. Kathleen's successor as SFEP chair is Naomi Laredo.

❸ **Ann Morcos, ELS**, has launched the Web site for her medical writing and editing company, MorcosMedia. She designed and maintains the site herself and invites all of you to stop for a visit. Your comments are welcome.

<http://www.morcosmedia.com>



AMWA Viewed Through a Tunnel

My view of this year's AMWA annual conference is probably marred by tunnel vision! You see, I agreed to teach four workshops this year—one on each day of the conference. As a member of the Executive Committee, I was also required to attend meetings on Wednesday and Saturday mornings and the new member orientation meeting on Thursday morning. Because of these commitments, I had only one free afternoon during the week! However, the experience was great fun.

The highlight of this year's conference, I believe, was the initiation of AMWA's new mentoring program. This program, the brainchild of Susan Siefert, ELS, paired new AMWA members with more seasoned members who could give advice, help participants get acquainted with other AMWA members, and offer suggestions based on work experience. One of my "mentees" is a medical doctor who is interested in becoming a medical writer; he had excellent questions about starting a freelance business. All of the new members with whom I spoke had great things to say about the mentoring program; it made them feel more at home in the midst of a large group of strangers and showed them

that all of us share many of the same concerns.

All four of my workshops (two each of Basic Grammar and Usage and Advanced Grammar) were filled to bursting and beyond, even the one offered on Saturday afternoon on a wonderfully sunny and beautiful Miami day. The interest in these grammar workshops indicates to me that many medical writers and editors realize that they need to brush up on their basic language skills. The course participants (whose heads were probably spinning after three hours of instruction on subject-verb agreement, dangling participles, and parts of speech) told me that they found the workshops helpful. Since the conference, I've heard from one of them who says that she is now determining the use of parts of speech in all of her sentences with a view toward clarity. I guess I made an impression!

My busy workshop schedule required me to be particularly well organized. I had to "grade" approximately 100 sets of homework exercises, and I also had to find new ways to match the course content to several different audiences. The participants' comments and questions during the workshops kept me on my toes. I owe a debt to Nancy Taylor, PhD, ELS, who helped me lead one session of Basic Grammar, and to Terry Neeper-Bradley, PhD, who assisted me with the other ses-

sion. The experience of leading four workshops in four days was draining but well worth the effort.

AMWA's educational program is what makes AMWA a special organization. It never ceases to amaze me that so many professionals are willing to donate their time and effort to help others become better at what they do. I am grateful for the opportunities that I've gained by participating in this program and for the chance to give back to the organization some of what it has done for me.



Flo Witte, ELS



Notes From the President

CSE Highlights BELS History

An article tracing the history of BELS' founding, starting with the initiative of a group of author's editors in CBE (now CSE) to establish certification for editors in the life sciences and culminating in the founding of BELS as an independent certifying board, will appear in the next issue of *Science Editor*, the journal of CSE. Written by Immediate Past President Norman Grossblatt and President Barbara B. (Bobbie) Reitt, the article marks the 10th anniversary of the incorporation of BELS as a separate organization.

Certification Examination Revision

The good old test is getting a new coat of paint! John Darling, husband of former *BELS Letter* editor Grace Darling, has undertaken the Herculean task of revamping the test to improve its appearance, especially the graphics that accompany many of the questions. In the course of revising its appearance, Darling is also incorporating new questions produced by the Certification Examination Development Committee, chaired by Karen Phillips. Proofreaders for the revamped test are Norman Grossblatt, Leslie Neistadt, Shirley Peterson, and Bobbie Reitt.

Any of you who participated in the question validation session in San Antonio last May will recall that the Certification Examination Development Committee, comprising Leslie Neistadt, Walter Pagel, Sally Edwards, and Chris Wogan, has prepared a group of new questions that must be validated under actual testing conditions before they can be used "for real" in future tests. Questions undergoing validation will be scattered throughout the test, and for one year candidates will answer them along with the questions that do count. The performance of the new questions will be tracked; those that pass muster will be cycled onto the exam, to replace questions selected for retirement.

Many thanks to everyone who has helped move this complex and most important process along—including those of you who gave up an evening in San Antonio to pretend to take a test and then to discuss the questions with the committee!

Neistadt to Become New BELS Registrar

Leslie Neistadt, a member of BELS since 1997, has been appointed the new registrar for the Certification Examination by President Bobbie Reitt. Neistadt will assume her new duties later this spring, after a period of training by current registrar Shirley Peterson, who has served in this position since 1997.

The BELS registrar is the public face of the organization, the person outsiders and potential candidates meet first. The work of registrar is crucially important to BELS, because the process we follow must at all times be completely accurate and fair. The registrar performs many tasks: accepting people into candidacy, registering them for specific examinations, notifying them of their results, maintaining accurately the voluminous records these processes generate, and maintaining a friendly, firm, and calm demeanor in the face of test jitters that at times can generate a good deal of tension. The registrar also oversees the arrangements for each sitting of the exam-

ination.

As Shirley is preparing her materials to pass them along to Leslie, she is composing a flow chart and accompanying narrative that describes in detail the process we follow at each step along the way, from the potential candidate's initial request for information through the final notification of test results.



DUES TIME!

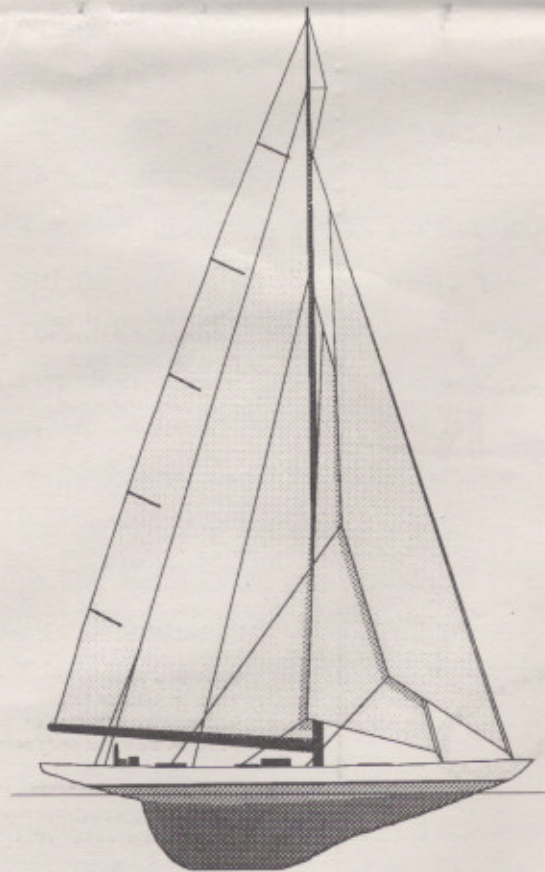
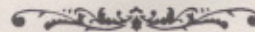
Member Relations chair Susan Aiello mailed out the annual dues notice in batches. The deadline has been extended to February 15. As soon as you receive yours, please respond IMMEDIATELY! You do not want to miss out on the benefits of active membership in BELS, which include receipt of this newsletter, among other privileges. Also, please include the questionnaire asking about skills you would be willing to donate to the cause!

10th-Anniversary Banquet and Annual Meeting

The annual meeting this year is a big deal. We will be celebrating our 10th birthday in Washington, DC, at the National Academy of Sciences on Sunday evening, May 6. We will honor the founding members and all past officers, and we want everyone in BELS to be there for this very special occasion. The room at the academy is

magnificent, and we hope the food will be good, too. No, neither Elvis nor Mozart will be in attendance, but who needs them when we have one another? Bring your spouse, your significant other, your favorite author, your firstborn, or your mother--whomever you wish--but DO come. (Details will be highlighted in the annual meeting announcement, to be mailed out in late March--but ONLY to those who've paid their dues. Ahem.)

 Barbara B. Reitt, ELS(D) 



A SALUTE TO

New BELS Members

November 7, 2000

CONGRATULATIONS!

CONGRATULATIONS!

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BELS Examination Schedule

Date	City & Association	Registration Deadline
2001		
May 5, 2001	Washington, DC, CSE	April 21
September 15, 2001	Chicago, IL	September 1
October 23, 2001	Norfolk, VA, AMWA	October 9
2002		
March 23, 2002	Memphis, TN	March 9
March 23, 2002	Princeton, NJ	March 9
May 4, 2002	San Diego, CA, CSE	April 20
October 29, 2002	San Diego, CA, AMWA	October 15
2003		
May 3, 2003	Pittsburgh, PA, CSE	April 19
June 8, 2003	Bath, England, EASE	May 25
October-November 2003	TBA, AMWA	TBA

For more information, write to Registrar, BELS, PO Box 8133, Radnor, PA 19087-8133



BELS Letter

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