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In this episode, Taren Grom, Editor-in-Chief of PharmaVOICE Magazine meets with Shiri Diskin, Ph.D. VP, Head of Medical Writing at Bioforum.

Taren: Dr. Diskin, welcome to the WoW podcast program.

Shiri: Thank you for having me.

Taren: It is our pleasure. Shiri, can you share with us what your role as VP, Head of Medical Writing at Bioforum entails?

Shiri: Taren, I am responsible for all aspects of daily leading of the medical writing department. This includes hiring and training personnel, finding projects with clients and allocating the right resources and ensuring of course the on-time delivery of the accurate and regulation complying documents. I am also a member of the company's senior management and so I'm involved in setting company business goals and the strategy to reach them. Because of my personal preference, I also continue to work as a senior medical writer and I serve as a project leader on some of the bigger projects.

Taren: That's a fairly large remit. How do you balance all of that in a day? Because you're wearing a lot of hats.

Shiri: Over the years I've found that tasks and loads tend to balance themselves out. And that many times I will have to be in a meeting for management, but on the same day I may probably not have meetings with clients. I just really do sincerely love everything that I do, and so I really can't even imagine giving any of it up. So for the time being with a lot of support from my team and from my colleagues and all parts of the company I manage – of course, I have a very strong home front. I have a highly supportive husband and children, so that helps a lot. My mother is also a good support. So altogether it's a village and it all supports the myriad tasks that I have to do over a day and a week.

Taren: Yes, it does take a village. And you preempted me because you said of all the things that you – because those are all things you love to do. I was going to ask you to identify what's your favorite part of your role because of so many hats you wear. Is there one thing that you enjoy more than another?

Shiri: At any given moment, I will tell you that the things that I'm doing right now is what I love most. Today was an exciting day because I gave a training session to my team in the morning

and then I sat with some clients on a clinical study report, which is a type of document that I love because I get to see the rationale and the thinking that goes into a clinical study. I get to feel like I'm doing a lot of science in my work. And then now we're doing some extracurricular activities. So all in all I would have to say that this has been a very good day for me.

Taren: That's awesome. Well, thank you for carving out some of your day for us. You talked just a second ago about training. I know that you find it very important to train medical writers. Tell me what that experience is like because let's face it, we live in this world now where people have access to computers and everybody who can put down a couple of words thinks they're a writer and that's not always the case, right?

Shiri: Medical writers are a unique breed. They start out their career after having many times a Ph.D. and a few of them also have a few post docs under their belt and then they are not kids anymore fresh out of college and they come into industry and all of a sudden they have a whole set of expertise that they still need to acquire because the expertise that are required to be a medical writer in the industry are quite different from what you get in academia. There are some parallels but not everything.

We are lucky to have professional associations that are very good about providing professional development courses. Those are the American and European Medical Writers Associations. But in-house we have also devised a very robust and extensive curriculum. So we meet twice a month for two-hour training sessions and we cover all topics from guidelines, to professional expertise in handling the intricacies of the Word program, and the structure of a specific document and how to build it. We also cover aspects of project management and client relationships and soft and hard skills that are all relevant to our work. Every team member has to be part of the curriculum. And these training sessions are either given by me, such as today, or are given by other senior team members.

We also make use of internal review cycles. So if I am reviewing someone else's work and I find that they have written something not quite in the way that I would have done it, I not only correct the writing, but I will add a comment saying in this type of document for this type of reason, I would do it this way and I would use this as a platform to share my knowledge and teach my more junior colleagues and hopefully help them create a wide basis of knowledge for their ongoing work.

Taren: Excellent. And what is the end result of this medical writing that you all do? For those who aren't familiar with this particular area of the industry and part of the development cycle.

Shiri: Basically there are two types of medical writing, so to speak. There are regulatory documents that we write and those culminate in documents that are submitted to regulatory authorities for the purpose of getting approval for marketing. So if you are developing a product, you will need approval from FDA and we will be the professionals to write the documents that are highly structured and subjected to very strict guidelines on the content and on the structure, and those will be used to convey your messages and present your data to the regulatory authorities in accordance – in line with their guidelines.

The other type of medical writing is writing journal articles for professional literature. So if you are an academic group or even a biotech company or a big pharma company and you have conducted a study and you want to publish its results in the literature, we would be helping you write this paper, helping you convey and present your results in a manner that makes it more likely to be accepted into a good journal and making sure that it's not only robust scientifically and accurate, but also in meeting with best practices of transparency and accuracy and so forth.

Taren: That's excellent. Thank you so much for sharing your expertise in those areas and what an important part of the role you play in moving drugs through the pipeline. A minute ago you said another part of your job that you really enjoy is working with clients, and I know that you often get involved during the early stages of clinical development. What are some of the key areas of importance that you share with clients, even at that early stage, to help set them up on the right trajectory?

Shiri: So of course, a medical writer is not a clinical development adviser and we are more of a sounding board is what I'd like to consider us. I find that you know how they used to talk about the elevator pitch?

Taren: Yeah.

Shiri: I find that when you need to explain your research to an educated outsider, such as a medical writer, it makes you think in-depth about the rationale of your study and about your entire development program. Because when you need to explain that to me in a manner that I will understand it enough to convey your messages and present your data and present your research to the audience, whether it be a journal editor or a regulatory authority member, then it makes you sit down and think when people are involved in research and development, they are so caught up in the race to achieve the next goal, to meet the next deadline that they sometimes don't – even though they are actively involved in research – they don't have the time to just sit there and dedicate their attention to thinking about the scientific rationale of what they're doing. What are you looking for? Why are you looking for that? Are you sure that the methods that you're employing to answer your hypothesis, your scientific questions, are those the correct methods that should be used? Are those the best methods that should be used? And when you need to sit with me and explain all those things to me and sometimes justify them just in order for me to be able – not because I'm a judge of any source, but because I will need to understand these things in order to write the report for you or write the article for you. It sometimes gets the people to take a pause and take a broader view on the development program, on the project, on the science behind it all, on their long term objectives. So I think that this is a very important tact to subscribe to right from the start.

You need to know where you're going. This is clinical research. This is not exploration. You need to know where you're going and think long and hard on how you're going to get there. And part of our support for clients is giving them the opportunity to stop and think about all of that at various points in the development program.

Taren: Your passion for this comes through very clearly, which is marvelous. So much so that I also know that you teach workshops to medical doctors and scientists on the subject beyond what you do at Bioforum. So tell me why this is important to give back to the medical community.

Shiri: I think doctors that I meet in my courses they are sometimes more worried about writing their results than about doing the actual research. This is a lot more about doubts and anxiety than it is about subject matter knowledge. And if they know their stuff, they know what they did, they know their scientific question, they know what they did to answer it, but they are so worried that maybe they're not skilled enough in writing, maybe they don't know English well enough, that they are just unable to figuratively lift themselves off the couch and do the work and do the writing. And I feel that if I can give them a few tools, a few perspectives that will help them lower their activation energy, then my role has been fulfilled.

It is so exciting to me to meet one of my students a year or two down the line showing me a publication, sometimes more than one, saying you know, your course was the push that I needed in order to conquer my fear and sit down and write. Sometimes it's like you know how some people would write poems and hide them in the drawer because they're too afraid that their little piece of art will be damaged and frowned upon and not given a positive feedback, and people feel the same way about their results; they're afraid that they'll be rejected. And when you just give them a few simple tools and give them the understanding that writing a scientific article is so much more about understanding the science, understanding the study than about being a literary prodigy, then that helps them a lot and that pushes them along and they can just sit down and do it.

Taren: Fabulous. And obviously again, your love for this craft is so immense that you've also written a book on the subject. Tell me what's the name of the book and tell me how that experience was for you in writing the book that's been published worldwide now.

Shiri: Yes. So the title of my book is *The 21st Century Guide to Writing Journal Articles in the Biomedical Sciences*. That borrows from my other passion which is reading science fiction. I am a big sci-fi nerd and so I – you know, just like in my courses, I really wanted to share my knowledge and just sort of tell the people that it's really not that bad and you can just do it. Here are a few simple tools that you can use and if you know your science, you can just write it and it will be okay.

Some people don't know the basics of the publishing industry. They don't know how to submit. They don't know how to construct an article and when they learn that, which is very, very simple, but somehow it has become so daunting because everyone's careers now depends on achieving their publishing goals and publishing in the right journals that it has become so scary where really it shouldn't be. And so that was my attempt at sharing my knowledge in a structured and attainable way.

Taren: Fantastic. You know I'm not letting you off the hook. I'm going to have to ask you as a sci-fi nerd, what is your favorite sci-fi franchise?

Shiri: Oh, Star Trek definitely. Hands down.

Taren: Without hesitation. Excellent.

Shiri: Yes, yes. I did not need to think about that too long.

Taren: Wonderful. Keeping along the line of like keeping in close collaboration because I know that you also work with a number of multidisciplinary clinical teams, how do you balance or create that successful partnership internally, and externally sometimes?

Shiri: So I am a big believer in the old phrase good fences make good neighbors. I think that multidisciplinary teams in writing a regulatory document for a clinical study or a clinical development program, the roles are pretty well defined right from the get-go. And if you work with other people and you start the process by coordinating expectations and being transparent and being very respectful of other people's knowledge and experience and you know the boundaries of where your role ends and someone else's begins, then the work can just run very smoothly and all sorts of organizational politics and resentments, all that is just not... does not come to light and it doesn't happen and the work just runs as it should. Because you let people do their work, they are there to achieve the mutual goals of the product, of the sponsor, and they're not there to step on one another's toes, and you just collaborate. You need to be appreciative and attentive to other people's opinions and at the same time maintain your own – meet your own goals, maintain your own part, make sure that you perform your role adequately and then collaboration will be successful.

Taren: Would you say that collaborative is one of the keys to your leadership style? If so, great. And what other – how else would you describe yourself as a leader?

Shiri: Well, I think that I try to be attentive is my main thing. I try to listen. That's like my main secret sauce. No one ever – either in my team or anywhere else – is too young or too junior to provide me with a valuable perspective or a valuable observation that I can use to make better decisions. And so I make abundant use of the mute button on my Zoom or Teams or whatever platform I'm using at the moment, and I use that to make myself listen. And when people understand – not everyone is used to that – and I'm sometimes surprised at how they are surprised. Because I would get feedback saying 'are you going to start talking now?' I'm like I'm listening to you, please go on, and she's like 'okay, well since you're listening to me this is what I have to say...' and they're not use to that from managers.

And before we started the recording you mentioned our CEO and that is very much his style as well. He is also very attentive and also very accepting of different perspectives and I think that that fosters collaboration. When you feel heard, you get more recruited and you want to contribute because you feel that you're valued. This is a technical way of conveying to team members that they're valued, that they're important and that you want to hear what they have to say.

Taren: Wonderful. And being attentive and you talked about Zoom and I loved that idea, abundant use of the Zoom – of the mute button on Zoom. We can't have a discussion right now without talking about how you led through the pandemic. It's been tricky. A lot of folks have competing attention on their competing focus because they've got kids, they've got parents, they've got whatever going on in their world. How are you managing all of this and leading your teams through the pandemic?

Shiri: So believe it or not, we have actually doubled in size over the past year.

Taren: Wow.

Shiri: And the reason for that is that the work from home and the quarantines that were enacted during the pandemic actually normalized remote work, and I think that nothing has ever normalized remote work in quite the same way. What that did to us is that it expanded the geographic scope of locations for employees immensely. Because we are working over videoconference platforms we can have employees that reside in places in which our office is not, they cannot come to the office everyday but at the same time, the home front has become much more demanding.

Everyone needs to be a cook, an IT manager, a homeschool teacher and do all of that while still upholding their role and then doing their tasks for work. And the way that we've solved this is, first of all, to say listen this is okay. We are all in the same boat. We helped fund comfortable home workstation for our employees. They each got some budget to get a comfortable office chair so that I don't have to sit over Zoom and see that my employee is sitting for eight hours on a plastic chair at her dining table to sit down and write. That's just not right. You can't work like that. We opened up the schedule completely to flexitime. Of course, everyone still needs to meet their deadlines and they need to attend meetings, but they can work whenever it is okay for them under these constraints.

So the most important thing here of course is that all of my employees, as I mentioned, they are all adults, highly educated, very responsible, very committed, and this can only work when you don't need to hold everyone's hand in order to make sure that tasks are being performed and performed well and performed on time. But when you are blessed with a team like mine, you can give them a lot of leeway to take personal responsibility over their tasks and just provide them with the tools, provide them with the expertise, provide them with the training, provide them with the understanding that you believe in them and you count on them and you support them, and then wonderful things can happen. Because I feel like I am more of an orchestra conductor than a manager, so to speak; they each play their own instrument. They play it very well. And it's up to me to make collaborative music out of that.

One of the main issues in working from home other than the physical conditions is the isolation. Because it is a big advantage to come into the office and have adult conversations with your friends, have some respite from household chores and just have these boundaries, these separations between work-life and home-life. We try to meet.

So other than our training sessions that I mentioned before, we have a weekly team meeting and I used to think that meetings are a waste of time and nothing – no meeting cannot be replaced by an email. But when you are cooped up at home and you cannot get out, meeting your colleagues, even online over video, and I make sure that and everyone knows that they absolutely have to have their cameras open because you need this human interaction. You need to see your colleagues faces, you need to see their eyes. And this is a means for us to support each other and overcome the geographic distance and make it feel as if we're all sharing like a mutual physical location.

Taren: That's lovely. Job well done. That's great insights. I love that you've made that pivot from that email to – well, it's not quite physical, but that in appearance that you can see into your colleagues eyes. It is so important that isolation has been devastating to so many. So kudos to you. Shiri, I know you spent a lot of time at Teva as well before joining Bioforum. Can you share some advice with other women who may want to reach that executive suite and what steps they should take to give themselves the best advantage of doing so?

Shiri: I think that you need to know yourself and I don't mean that in the – you know how some women are self-minimizing and 'I don't know this well enough' and 'I can't perform this role because I have not done this before,' and so on and so forth, but I feel that if you are very candid with yourself and you understand what your strengths are and what your areas that you could use support on are, then you should try and find the situation for yourself in which your strengths are being utilized to the maximum and your other areas are supported by your colleagues. So you need to surround yourself with people who of course believe in you and you have shared goals with, but also people who can complement – I don't want to use the word shortcomings, but areas in which you are not the strongest, you can find colleagues that complement you.

Taren: Fantastic. And finally, before I let you go, can you please share a wow moment with us? This could be a moment that either changed the trajectory of your career or has left a lasting impression on you.

Shiri: So I think that something like that has happened about a month ago where a small company that I had written a protocol for a clinical study about three years ago came to me requesting a proposal to write submission to FDA because they are now a midsize pharma company and their development program has grown so big that they are planning to submit for an NDA. And that makes me feel – of course, I'm not an employee in that company, but that makes me feel like I have supported them over a long period of time and I am being given the opportunity to share in their development and in their success. And it's a little bit like walking in the park and participating in planting a little tree and then coming every year and all of a sudden this is a big huge tree and you can sit under it and enjoy its shade. So that was a big moment of joy for me to participate in their success and support them.

Taren: That's wonderful. Thank you so much for sharing that story with us. And I want to thank you for being part of our WoW podcast program and for inspiring us to go boldly beyond where we thought we could go. Thank you so much, Shiri. It's been a pleasure.



Shiri: Thank you for having me. It's been wonderful.

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