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An innovative training post in medical writing

ST2 GP trainees at the Imperial College London GP Specialty Training Programme have the opportunity of amalgamating a 6-month general practice placement with an Innovative Training Post (ITP) of our choice. Rather than choose a more typical ITP such as rheumatology, oncology, or diabetes, I decided to explore the world of medical writing.

Medical writing is not something most GP trainees will have had much exposure to. It is not a part of the medical school curriculum, so, at most, the typical trainee may have participated in a research project or audit that eventually leads to a publication.

I certainly had no prior experience of medical writing, or writing in general for that matter. But I harboured an unfulfilled childhood fantasy of becoming an author, reporter, or TV presenter. This led me down the path of choosing an experience in the domain of medical writing.

My first assignment was a 4-week placement at the *British Journal of General Practice*. This post enabled me to understand the role of an editor and the process of article publication from initial submission through to final acceptance. I was also able to conduct my own small-scale research project. As someone with good intentions to read medical journals and keep up to date with the latest developments in medicine, I often found myself struggling to keep up with the steadily increasing pile of journals appearing on my doormat every month. I was keen to know if I was the only GP trainee falling into this black hole of underdeveloped and over-enthusiastic plans of career improvement through self-education. I decided to conduct a qualitative analysis of the use of the *BJGP* among trainees.

Using semi-structured interviews I explored the views of 11 GP trainees towards the *BJGP* and asked whether it is relevant to their stage of training. The results showed that although the journal was familiar to trainees, it was not frequently read, and very often not their journal of choice. It was also not viewed as educationally relevant as *InnovAiT*. Importantly, it was often read less frequently owing to poor visual appeal, occasionally even being labelled 'stodgy' and 'overcrowded'. The study suggested a need

for changes to the design and layout of the journal. It also needs to be available in an app format to increase readership among trainee GPs.

From the *BJGP* I moved to a 2-week placement at *Pulse*. This experience was a stark contrast to the primarily research-led environment I had been enveloped in at the *BJGP*. I realised I had underestimated the skill required for writing medical 'news' articles and found the experience challenging and exhausting, yet surprisingly rewarding.

During my ITP, I was also given the opportunity to attend a seminar on the subject of medical journalism by Dr Carol Cooper, a leading media doctor. Dr Cooper works as a medical adviser to the *Sun* newspaper and regularly contributes to both television and radio health programmes. The seminar highlighted the array of exciting opportunities that a portfolio career in general practice, including an interest in journalism, can offer. It also emphasised the need for motivation, the ability to rise to challenges, and the enormous flexibility such a career would demand.

My medical writing experience culminated in an afternoon at the BBC, observing the production of *Inside Health*, a Radio 4 health programme. It was here that I came to appreciate the amount of background work (both the technical expertise and research) required to create a successful and professional finished production.

So, in conclusion, was my ITP in medical writing useful? I think so. It certainly opened my eyes to the creativity and flexibility one can enjoy in a career in general practice, given the sufficient drive and inspiration. It stirred up my love of writing again, while exposing all the challenges that this 'special interest' may entail. So is there a career in it for me? Only time will tell ...

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