



EPISODE 118- Demystifying Medical Writing

With guest Dr. Yasmine Ali

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YA: “Because it might take you a year to find that really good medical writing job or jobs that you're looking for. Just be persistent. In medical writing more than any other nonclinical career, I think you have to be persistent.”

HF: Welcome to The Doctor's Crossing Carpe Diem podcast. If you're questioning your career in medicine, you've come to the right place. I'm Heather Fork, a former dermatologist and founder of The Doctor's Crossing. As a master certified coach, I've helped hundreds of physicians find greater happiness in their career, whether in medicine, a nonclinical job, or something else. I started this podcast to help you discover the career path that's best for you and give you some resources and encouragement to make it happen. You don't need to get stuck at the white coat crossroads. So, pull up a chair, my friend, and let's carpe that diem.

Hello hello and welcome back to the Doctor's Crossing Carpe Diem podcast. You're listening to episode number 118. In a previous podcast number 104 with Dr. Jordan Grumet, I mentioned how when we first connected 11 years ago, he was a very busy physician who was writing poetry on the side. He had no idea where his love for writing would lead him. As we learned in that episode, his passion for writing and storytelling led to him becoming a successful blogger, podcaster, speaker, and author. This is a great example of how love for writing can take one in a variety of directions and lead to good things.

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Today we have a very special guest, Dr. Yasmine Ali, who also shares a love for writing. Dr. Ali is going to talk to us about opportunities available to physicians in the broad area of medical writing. Yasmine is a cardiologist who began doing medical writing in med school and after practicing 20 years, transitioned into full-time medical writing and consulting.

Yasmine also loves writing fiction and non-fiction, and has a brand-new book out this week “Walk Through Fire: The Train Disaster that Changed America.” Her book is about the Waverley train disaster of 1978, which changed national disaster management and catalyzed the creation of FEMA.

Dr. Ali will be sharing with us all about the different types of medical writing, what skills are required, what the work involves, how to get started, the range of compensation, and some great insider tips. It is my true honor and pleasure to welcome Dr. Yasmine Ali to the podcast. Wow. Hey there, Yasmine. How are you?

YA: Hi, Heather. I'm great. Thank you so much for having me on. I'm a big fan of your podcast.

HF: You are so sweet. Well, I'm a big fan of course. And I'm definitely going to read this book.

YA: Thank you.

HF: Yeah, I saw a YouTube video about that accident where a big propane tank car blew up a couple days afterwards and was devastating.

YA: That's right. The night of February 22nd, 1978, an L&N train derailed in Waverly, Tennessee, my hometown. Two days later, one of the propane tankers that derailed with the train exploded and took a major part of the town with it. My parents were actually



the physicians on call for the emergency department at the community hospital there in Waverley at the time, and it was quite an event.

And this is the 45th anniversary of that disaster this year. You'll see in the book the minute-by-minute account that took me really 11 years to put together doing primary source research, speaking with all the survivors as well as the medical personnel at the hospital, and researching how that disaster was actually one of the final catalysts for the establishment of FEMA, the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

There were so many changes in national disaster management in the railroad industry from top to bottom and rail safety standards that all came out of that Waverley train disaster. And a lot of people just don't know about it. So hopefully people will read the story and be inspired and understand the really important part of our history.

HF: Well, absolutely, and I'll make sure to link to it in the show notes if you want to check it out.

YA: Thank you.

HF: Obviously, you're a writer and I love to begin at the beginning. How old were you when you first had an interest in writing or started writing?

YA: I have been writing since I was four.

HF: Very precocious.

YA: Because my mother taught me how to write. You know those booklets that you can train children on that have their ruled paper where you can learn to write your capital letters and your lowercase letters? We started with that, with the alphabet. And then I learned to write before I went to school, and that was her goal, was for me to be able to write in

order for me to get into the first grade at the age of five because I skipped kindergarten, which probably explains a lot. But that's how I started writing.

HF: Well, I remember you telling me exactly why you had to skip kindergarten. Do you want to share that?

YA: Yeah. I had to skip kindergarten because my father skipped kindergarten. So, he went to first grade when he was five and he decided that I was going to do the same. So that's how that started. And I went to a private Catholic school called St. Patrick's School. Its history is actually in that book "WalkThrough Fire." It's connected to the railroad, believe it or not. And so, I had to pass a test to be able to start the first grade at the age of five. And to pass that test my parents made sure I had all the learning I needed well before I took that test at the age of five. So, I was studying for the test when I was four.

HF: Oh my God. I remember you saying that he thought kindergarten was a waste of time. So, it's like, why bother with it?

YA: Why bother with kindergarten? What's the point of kindergarten? My dad is a general surgeon and very much a no nonsense type. Very much fits the stereotype that we think of with some of the general surgeons. Many of whom are my best friends, I must say. But there is a no nonsense personality type that goes along with that, I think.

HF: Right, exactly. If you don't need it, cut it out. If you don't need it, skip it. Alright. Now you were in this medical family, so I can see why you became a physician. Did you ever think of becoming a writer instead?

YA: Yes, when I was in high school. First of all, I'd always wanted to be a doctor since the age of three. And when I was in high school, I had a moment, sort of a crisis of faith, I would say, because I knew that I loved writing, I was writing all the time in all of my spare time in high school.

And the other thing I was doing was playing the piano. And so, I actually said to my parents “Maybe I could become a concert pianist or a writer. I love doing those things too.” And truly, I did not have the talent to become a concert pianist. And with the writing, they said, “Well, you can become a doctor and still write. There are many doctors who are writers.” And indeed, that's true. There are famous authors like Anton Chekhov who were physicians and became famous authors. They used that example with me.

And the other thing they said that really stayed with me I must say is that with medicine, you should be able to have a guaranteed income. And that is not always the case with writing. And they are correct. They were correct about that. I have no regrets about going into medicine. I do think it was something I was born to do. I love it. I love being a doctor, but I also love the writing and I'm so glad I've been able to marry the two passions.

HF: And do you play piano on the side?

YA: I do actually. But not for audiences. I do it for myself. It's a hobby.

HF: Okay. Well, that's great. And I do hear that rationale, coming from other parents, “You can always do this other thing, yet still be a doctor.” Now, talking about being a medical writer, a common question that comes up is what kind of writing are you doing? Can you help us out here with this whole big area of medical writing?

YA: Yeah, it is such a broad area actually that I have designed a course that will be available in your show notes on an overview of medical writing because there are so many different categories, and some of them are very well suited for physicians, while others maybe not as much.

So, I have done almost every kind of medical writing at this point. Some of the categories would be regulatory writing. And if you need me to explain any of these categories at any point, just ask. But regulatory writing, continuing medical education, that's a whole space of different kinds of writing within the CME space. Health blogging, health journalism, medical marketing. There are so many more. I'm going to have an entire list in that course, but those are the ones that are top of mind.

HF: And is there a difference in terms of compensation typically for the different types of writing?

YA: Yes. AMWA, the American Medical Writers Association puts out a survey every couple of years of medical writing salaries, and they break it down by these categories. And every time I have looked at the survey, regulatory writing is where the most money is. There are other categories like publications and CME that do well, but they are far second to regulatory.

Regulatory writing is helping medical device and pharmaceutical companies submit all the regulatory documents that are needed to get their device or drug approved by the USFDA or the European Union or different global agencies. And there are a lot of regulatory documents that go along with that, such as new drug applications, IRB consent forms, which have to go through different institutional review boards.

Then there is also the part of it that's the clinical trials regulatory writing. IRB might be considered that as well. There is clinical protocol writing, there is drug safety reports, adverse event reporting. If you're running a clinical trial, somebody needs to write up any adverse events that happen. Then at the end of it, there are the publications. Who's going to write the publication about the clinical trial? It's a space that has its tentacles that go out into the other spaces. So, it's a broad, broad space, but it's also a very well-paid area of medical writing.

HF: And later we'll talk about the compensational range, but this just gives the listeners an idea that within the different types of writing you can command different salaries or compensation. Let's go back to the beginning, in terms of a physician who might be raising this question of, "Hmm, I wonder if I could be a medical writer." What are some things that they might think about or even do to start answering this question?

YA: Yeah, I think the first thing I would do is see what's out there. Do a little research on what medical writing is and what sort of career opportunities are currently available because these things do change from time to time.

And the first place I would start would be with the AMWA website, the American Medical Writers Association. That's amwa.org. And they have a blog and they have a membership directory and they have so many resources for aspiring medical writers. You can really get a sense of what is out there, what's expected, what medical writers really do, what some of their lives look like on a day-to-day basis, even their work lives. And so, that's where I would start.

And then the second place would be on LinkedIn. And I would just type into the search box for the job search "medical writing" and see what comes up. And you will see all the different job opportunities that are out there and what companies are looking for right now. That'll give you an idea of what's out there.

HF: Those are great suggestions and I'll make sure to link to AMWA in the show notes. It is a great organization. I attended their annual conference. There was a lot of fun, really nice people. That's a great suggestion. What kind of qualifications are needed to be a medical writer?

YA: That totally depends on the area you are writing in and the capacity in which you are writing. If you want to write as a physician and be paid for your expertise as a physician, then you do need to be licensed. You need to have finished medical school, obviously,



have your MD or DO. Be licensed. And depending on what you are writing, usually if you are writing content for other physicians, whether it be CME content or something like that, you are usually required to have board certification, but not always.

If you're working as a medical reviewer and that's probably where I have the majority of my work now, actually, as a very experienced medical writer who wants to be paid as a physician. I am asked to review articles that are written by other people, sometimes by other physicians, sometimes by people who don't have a medical degree or maybe they have an RN or an RD or they're a PA. And they write blog posts or they've written even sometimes CME content and I'm asked to review it with my clinical eye and my expertise and looking for medical fact checking and accuracy and does this appeal to a physician audience? All those things. All the companies that I have contracted with to do that sort of medical review work require board certification. That's an area where it is needed.

HF: And just to clarify, you can be an MD without a license, but you just may not be eligible for certain types of medical writing.

YA: That's exactly right. Now again, most of the companies, even the ones who are recruiting bloggers. If you have an MD, that's great, but they also often ask for that license that's in the contract and that you have at least one state license. You can write without a license, but whether or not somebody from a large company will pay you for that, that's a different topic.

HF: Would a physician who's applying for these jobs need to have a portfolio or some current samples to be able to show a perspective hiring manager?

YA: Now, again, that depends and you'll hear me say that again and again. I know it's frustrating. But because there are so many different areas of medical writing and they really vary by what they're looking for and their expectations, it depends on whether or not you're asked for a writing sample.



If you are doing any kind of creative writing, and there is creative medical writing. And I think of that as mainly when you're writing to consumers writing for digital health media. When you're writing for the general public, that is a very different kind of writing than writing for a medical journal. Those companies will want you to show some sort of writing sample.

If you are going to help write a manuscript, help a company that has just finished a large clinical trial and they need medical writers to help with their manuscripts, you would be helped out a lot in your application if you've had prior publications, if you've had peer reviewed publications. But it is not a necessity if you've been through medical school and you can show that you understand how to read the medical literature.

If you are trying to write in the CME space, and the biggest part of the CME space for writers at this time is writing needs assessments. That's part of a grant proposal to help the sponsoring company get the funding to put on a CME talk. If you're writing the needs assessment, everyone I've ever talked to wants to know how many have you written in the past and can you show us an example.

You can get around that showing an example there, because most CME companies require you to sign an NDA, a non-disclosure agreement that you will not share your examples, that you won't share any of the work that you've written for them. So you can always say that and they really expect you to say that. It's like, "Well, I have examples but I can't share them." That sort of thing. It's actually a little easier to break into than people think. I would say don't be shocked by that.

In the regulatory space, unless you want to go in at entry level, you're always asked whether or not you have had experience. And you don't have to show examples there either, but they'll want to know experience and whom you've worked for.

HF: Now we often like taking courses, getting certificates, and we often feel like we can't do something new unless we've had some formal instruction. Do you recommend someone take courses through AMWA or pay a lot of money to take a course in say regulatory writing or doing CME?

YA: I never recommend that somebody spend a lot of money. That's just my personal feeling. I think that physicians have a lot of talent and experience and skills that they don't realize. A lot of us who have been through the process of going to college and medical school and training have already done some of what is considered a skill set in medical writing. You've already maybe helped out with your research lab, writing an IRB form or helping with a clinical trial protocol. You've probably written a case report, you've probably written a case review. You've certainly done histories and physicals, which people don't realize are a form of narrative medical writing.

By virtue of being a physician, you've got that. You've done PowerPoint presentations. Believe it or not, being able to design slide decks, which are basically PowerPoint presentations, is a major skill set in the medical writing space. And I think we've all done a PowerPoint presentation, so you already have that experience.

I think if you want to learn more about a specific type of medical writing, I would say regulatory writing is probably the space where if you're going to spend money on anything, that's where I would spend it. It's trying to get some experience writing those regulatory documents, because that is a little harder.

CME space. We've all done CME, right? If you've been to medical school, you've done CME. You know what CME content looks like and you know how to read the literature, how to put together a literature review. Most physicians do. I don't think you need anything special for CME other than just jump in and try to do something. Try to do one.

And by the way, if you've ever given a talk, a PowerPoint for a meeting or for med school or for your training program, save that. That's an example of your work and you can submit that. And if somebody asks for a writing sample, that's a writing sample. You can absolutely submit that slide deck. It's a very high-end writing sample too, by the way, because most of the people who do these slide decks for medical communications and CME companies do not have MDs or DOs. So, you've got a leg up there anyway.

HF: These are great tips because we often feel like we don't have anything. We feel like we're coming to the table empty handed, but you're already helping us acknowledge that we have skills, we've done things, we actually have a portfolio. We just need to kind of call it that and put things in it.

YA: Absolutely.

HF: Another thing that comes up is "Should I be a freelancer and start out on my own or should I try to get a full-time or part-time paid position as an employee?"

YA: I would approach that question with another question, which is what is your goal? Are you wanting to write on the side or are you wanting this to become a full-time career? And if you're wanting the latter, if you want to eventually transition into medical writing as a full-time career, I think it's good to start out with a couple of side gigs. If you are in a job where you just can't stand to be there any longer, and look, I've been there, I understand that some of your listeners may be at that point.

If you are in a job where you can't stand to be there any longer then I would say to get into medical writing, look for a part-time or full-time employed position. Do not try to start out full-time as a freelancer. It's really hard, even for those of us who have been doing it for over a decade. As a freelancer myself, it is still hard. You're constantly looking for new clients, trying to keep your old ones, looking for new opportunities, making sure you get paid. It's a big deal to go out as a freelancer full-time. I would say either keep



your day job and start doing some side gigs, or if you have to quit your day job, find an employed position as a medical writer.

HF: And I like that there are these options. For example, we had Dr. Mandy Armitage almost two years ago I think, who became a medical writer. And she started out freelance and then she went to employed, then she did some freelance and I think she's doing employed again. So, it's nice as your life changes and circumstances change, you can offer a different configuration.

YA: Yeah, absolutely. For nine or 10 years I actually had a part-time employment with one company as a medical writer and supplemented that with other freelance positions.

HF: We like flexibility. That's something I hear so much. I need flexibility.

YA: Yes, yes. I love the flexibility and the autonomy.

HF: We're going to take a short break here. Don't go away, we'll be right back and we'll be talking about compensation.

If you are applying to a nonclinical job, it's a great idea to convert your CV to a resume. A well-crafted resume helps recruiters see why you are the right person for the job. My resume kit is a downloadable PDF that walks you step by step through creating an impressive resume of your own. You'll have everything you need, including templates and a bonus on writing a winning cover letter. To get immediate access to this kit that I use with my coaching clients, go to doctorscrossing.com/resumekit or simply go to the Doctors Crossing website and hit the products tab at the top of the page. Now back to our podcast.



We are back here with Dr. Yasmine Ali and we're talking about medical writing. Everybody wants to know about the money and I think there is some concern around medical writing. What kind of guidance would you give us?

YA: Yeah, that's a great question. That is the big question and I think it's a very valid concern because I think among all the different nonclinical career opportunities you could do that still utilize your medical expertise, medical writing is the least well compensated. I do think people need to know that upfront.

If you look at the AMWA salary survey, and I highly encourage you to go to whatever your favorite search engine is and type in "AMWA salary survey", you will get their latest report. Some of it is public, and you'll see the exact ranges of what medical writers who are actively practicing are making. So, when you see that, you'll see that in regulatory writing, as I said, that is the most well compensated.

The writers who are making the most are usually freelance. That tells you they have experience because you don't get into regulatory writing as a freelancer without experience. They have some experience under their belts. They are making in the \$200,000 to \$250,000 range. And those are people who are not necessarily MDs or DOs, but they often have an advanced degree in science or they have a PhD or a masters. Usually PhD.

Then you'll see the other breakdowns, and it's very variable, but it can be anywhere from the low end of \$80,000 per year to that high end of \$250,000. That's annual salary median compensation. But there's also the thing to look at. What I get asked the most about are rates. So, what do I charge or how do I charge and what should I expect for my writing? And once again, that's highly variable.

There are hourly rates and project rates. And most experienced medical writers will tell you they prefer to work on project rates because if you are really efficient, you actually

get penalized for working on an hourly rate. For example, let's say you can get a project rate for \$3,000. If it takes you three hours to do it, that's \$1,000 per hour. And I'm not joking, I've done stuff like that because I have the experience, and it's the same project rate that might be offered to someone with less experience who takes a lot longer and might bring it down to \$100 per hour for them.

The project rate is the way to go if you can get it. But it is hard to get, it is hard to get a company to agree to that. And it's hard for you to know if you don't have a lot of experience what you should charge for a project rate because you don't know how much it's going to take you and what other people are charging and what's the market rate.

For hourly rates, what I tell people, for physicians, what I have seen are hourly rates anywhere from \$100 per hour for blog posts. And I'll say medical review work there because I should step back. If you're actually writing a blog post, you may actually be paid per word and that may be like 50 cents per word, or you may be paid a flat fee of \$100 or \$200 for the whole post and it might be 800 - 1,000 word post.

Let me step back and just say, when I talk about hourly rates for blogging, I'm talking about medical review work where you're really using your physician's hat to review those. So, that I've seen, \$100 per hour to \$180 per hour. There's that range and it's usually not full-time work. There's the catch because you might get five hours from them for the month, that's \$500 for the month for that work. So, you've got to supplement with a lot of different gigs when you're doing those hourly rates.

HF: Well, that's very helpful guidance. Thank you so much for those specifics. Now briefly, are there certain specialties that are more in demand for writers?

YA: Yes. Right now, oncology is the very hot specialty because that's where most of the drugs are coming out, the newest, latest precision drugs. You'll see when you look through your LinkedIn jobs that so many of them look for medical writers who have experience in

oncology. That's probably number one. Second is immunology and then gastroenterology. I've also seen a lot for cardiology and OB-GYN because there is a lot coming out in the fertility and menopause spaces. The specialties that are in demand tend to follow where the drug development is.

The other thing I would say is do be prepared or at least be open to the idea of writing outside your specialty. For example, I'm a cardiologist and I have been helping a number of companies with women's health and reproductive health and pregnancy apps, developing pregnancy apps. These sorts of things. That's not what you typically think of a cardiologist doing but as an MD, they really respect that. I do have clinical expertise and I know more about the anatomy and physiology of the reproductive system than any member of the public would. That's still very valuable, your medical expertise.

HF: That's excellent. And we all started learning at the same place when we started in medical school. And whatever we don't know now, we can certainly learn. And I think it helps keep it interesting too.

To wrap up here, I wanted to see if you could help us out for when we're trying to get into medical writing, but we may be hitting some roadblocks and feeling discouraged. Do you have any suggestions there when someone may not get back to you on LinkedIn or you don't get that first job or you don't feel like you're a good writer?

YA: Yeah, I would say expect that to happen. And this is very difficult for physicians because we may not be used to so much rejection. If you're a writer though, you are used to it. And any of your listeners who have written and tried to submit creative writing pieces for publication know this, you have to expect a lot of rejection. Well, it happens in the medical writing space too. You may apply for 10 jobs and not hear back from many of them because each job has 350 applicants.

You can't give up though. That doesn't mean you're not meant to be a medical writer. You will make it. Just keep trying. It might take you a year. This is why I tell people don't quit your day job unless you have to because it might take you a year to find that really good medical writing job or jobs that you're looking for. Just be persistent. In medical writing more than any other nonclinical career, I think you have to be persistent.

HF: That is such a great point about how writers are used to rejection because they're submitting their pieces and think "I'll never get chosen." If they just understand that's part of the process, I think that's really good for us because we're so used to winning and getting accepted and being the top of this and that. And so, we have to put our ego aside and say, "If this is something I really want, I'm going to go after it." And that's what I've seen with my clients who pursued medical writing. It's the ones who persist who prevail.

YA: Yes, absolutely.

HF: Well, congratulations to you. I love how you've changed your career and morphed it over time to keep doing what you love. You have a great career in cardiology, you love, you love this writing and now you have this great book that came out. So, congratulations, Yasmine.

YA: Thank you so much, Heather.

HF: My absolute pleasure. All right guys, thanks so much for listening. We'll have some helpful links in the show notes for you, including Yasmine's book. Don't forget to carpe that diem. I'll see you in the next episode and bye for now.

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Podcast details

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