



**Southwest
Chapter**

Newsletter of AMWA Southwest Chapter

July 2005

July Meeting

Mimi Swartz, Executive Editor, *Texas Monthly*

Date: July 16, 2005 (Saturday)

Time: 12:00 noon to 2:00 p.m.

Place: Villa Capri restaurant, Seabrook, Texas
(on Clear Lake)

On Saturday, July 16, the Southwest Chapter of the American Medical Writers Association (AMWA) will continue its summer tradition of meeting for a luncheon presentation at the Villa Capri restaurant on Clear Lake. The guest speaker will be Mimi Swartz, who will discuss her experiences while writing "Till Death Do Us Part" (published in the March, 2005 issue of *Texas Monthly*), in which she details the events that led to the end of the long-standing relationship between Houston's Baylor College of Medicine and Methodist Hospital.

Ms. Swartz is an executive editor at *Texas Monthly*. She has worked as a staff writer for *The New Yorker* and *Talk Magazine* and has published articles in *The New York Times*, *Slate*, *Vanity Fair*, and other national publications. In 1996, she won a National Magazine Award for her article "Not What the Doctor Ordered," about the influence of insurance companies on medical decision-making.

We will meet at 12 noon for lunch, which will start with a garden salad, followed by your choice of entrees: chicken piccata with pasta-of-the-day, grilled fish with roasted potatoes al forno, tortellini alfredo, or rigatoni marinara (pasta with capers and black olives). There will then be coffee and dessert.

To register for this event, please RSVP by Tuesday, July 12 to Steve Palmer at spalmer@amwasouthwest.org.

Please include your first and last name, your address, and your phone number. Also, indicate whether you are a member or nonmember. Please be prepared to pay (\$18 for members, \$20 for nonmembers) by cash or check (payable to AMWA Southwest) at the door on the day of the event, or mail your check to Steve Palmer at 6615 Meadowlawn Street, Houston TX 77023. Payment will be required for each email registration received.

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Villa Capri is located at 3713 NASA Road 1 in Seabrook, Texas. To get there, take I-45 to exit 25, then travel approximately 6 miles east (about 2 miles past the Hilton hotel) on NASA Road 1. The restaurant is on the right-hand side

of the road. For more detailed directions, call Villa Capri at 281.326.2373 or visit their web site at www.villacapri@clearlake.com.

AMWA Southwest Chapter Sixth Annual Career Roundtables and Business Meeting

More than 30 members and guests attended the sixth annual career roundtables discussion and business meeting at Baba Yega's restaurant in May. Outgoing president Natasha Calder began the meeting by thanking the members for all of their contributions during her tenure as president and long-time treasurer Chris Wogan, ELS, for agreeing to succeed her as president.

The winner of the fourth annual AMWA Southwest Chapter Scholarship for Biomedical Communication, David (Dave) Primm, of Dallas, also attended the May meeting and was awarded a certificate of recognition, \$500, and a complimentary 1-year membership in AMWA. Please read his winning essay on page 3.

Following the presentation, the new chapter officers and board members were voted in. The new officers are Chris Wogan, ELS, president; Stephen Palmer, PhD, ELS, president-elect/program chair; Anita Frijhoff, PhD, assistant program chair; Alison Woo, treasurer; Jude Richard, ELS, secretary; Hanson Yu, PhD, newsletter editor; and Lorraine Cherry, PhD, Tom Gegeny, MS, ELS, Jane Krauhs, PhD, ELS, and Penny Logan, MS, directors-at-large. A complete list of officers, directors, and committee chairs is on page 6.

Newly elected president Wogan then invited members and guests to sit down to a dinner of chicken marsala and vegetarian pasta. Minutes later, the leaders of the four roundtables began their discussions.

Karen F. Phillips, ELS, scientific publications manager at M. D. Anderson Cancer Center and managing editor of the *Journal of Clinical Ultrasound*, led a discussion on setting editorial priorities and determining how much editing on a manuscript is enough. Stephen Palmer, PhD, ELS, and Christina Chambers, MA, ELS, medical writer/editors at the Texas Heart Institute, discussed the potential benefits of BELS certification for different types of medical writers and offered tips on how to prepare to take the BELS exam. Jude Richard, ELS, also from the Texas Heart Institute, discussed the principles of evidence-based medicine and the ways in which evidence-based medicine may affect the work of medical writers and editors in years to come. Finally, Ruth Sorelle, MPH, who served as the *Houston Chronicle's* medical writer for 20 years before leaving in 1998 to become senior director of special projects in the office of public affairs at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, discussed the strenuous task of remaining objective about medical matters in an era of subjective journalism.

Winning Essay

AMWA Southwest Chapter Student Scholarship

The Influence of Neurostimulation on Medical Writing

by David L. Primm

Improvements in neurostimulation devices and programming are expanding the dimensions of pain care. They are resulting in innovative therapies for patients and at the same time increasing the need for writers who blend a knowledge of medical topics and genres with the skills of information technology writing.

Such is the case with spinal cord stimulation (SCS). SCS involves stimulating afferent nerves in the spinal cord in order to interfere with the transmission of pain signals from the trunk or extremities. SCS is delivered by electrodes placed within the spinal cord's epidural space at the level of a painful dermatome. The electrodes stimulate dorsal column nerves using electrical energy provided by an external or implanted power source, resulting in paresthesia (numbing) for a particular body area.

The nature of SCS's paresthetic effect is unknown, although a widely held explanation is that it is a product of activating large diameter A β nerve fibers in the dorsal column, which prevents the transmission of pain impulses by smaller diameter C-fibers (1). Other explanations suggest that the SCS effect may be due to engaging pain modulation pathways, inhibiting sympathetic efferent nerves, or altering the amount of endogenous analgesic substances within the central nervous system

(2–4). Despite the uncertainty about SCS's underlying mechanisms, it is becoming a popular therapy for many types of chronic neuropathic pain. Part of its appeal is due to its minimal risks for patients. Unlike nerve ablation, SCS requires only minor surgery and is reversible, and it allows patients to experience stimulation in a trial procedure before committing to an implanted SCS system. Moreover, it is effective over the long term for many chronic pain conditions and is not associated with serious complications (5–8).

Successful SCS depends not only on a knowledge of spinal structures and nerve physiology, but also on an understanding of the properties of electricity and the programming of electrodes. For example, the nerves that are targets for SCS are often lateral to the midline of the spinal cord's dorsal column, so care must be taken not to stimulate adjacent fibers in the nerve roots that could result in unpleasant or painful sensations. This unintended stimulation is avoided by controlling the shape and intensity of the stimulation field through carefully managing the amplitude and frequency of the electrodes' electrical energy and the pattern of their positive and negative charges.

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As the previous statement suggests, the manipulation of electrodes is the key to SCS, and this is accomplished through three separate electronic systems. The first is contained inside the power source that is implanted into or carried by patients; the second is in an external device that patients use to remotely control the power source or switch between its pre-set stimulation patterns; and the third is in a programming device that clinicians use to create such patterns and download them to the power source via the second device. All three devices pair microprocessors with sophisticated software and require a significant amount of training and support for clinical staff to use them.

The number of programmable devices and the training and support required by SCS are changing the roles of medical writers, for whom SCS combines the customary demands of medical writing with those usually reserved for information technology writers. Medical writers who work in an SCS field must be able to communicate the neurological effects of the therapy and its impact on disease states to clinicians, and they must be able to explain what stimulation fields are and how they are directed. Yet the writers must also engage in the pursuits of information technology writing, such as the creating of programming manuals, specification brochures, and user guides for the clinicians or patients. In fact, the writers may spend a majority of their time on these latter tasks, which unlike many medical writing assignments, require intimate collaborations with engineers or consultants, and lengthy planning, review, and document tracking processes.

Consequently, SCS writers represent a class of communication professionals who are further hybridizing the skills of medical and information technology writing. The writers must be able to accurately describe the biology

of SCS while providing documents that support the programming of SCS devices. Both tasks are crucial to maintaining the clinician knowledge base required for SCS and similar neurostimulation therapies. Therefore, the numbers of such writers will grow and the blending of skills will continue as these pioneering therapies become more prevalent.

References

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