



ANDREW D. ROBERTSON: *Creating a Vision*

A few years ago, while I was still a biochemistry professor at the University of Iowa, my wife and I were having one of our “kitchen table” chats, and we sketched out the perfect job for me, life science broker: I would track the latest advances in life science, identify potential but heretofore unrecognized overlapping interests in different fields, and then help scientists working on complementary problems to connect and collaborate with one another. At that time, neither of us could point to a real job with these qualities, but having the ideal job description in mind subsequently proved to be very handy.

I have now held three jobs over the last 3 years or so: I was on the faculty at the University of Iowa for over 13 years, but in 2004 I started a very stimulating year as a medical writer at Merck Research Laboratories (MRL), and in 2005 I became chief scientific officer (CSO) at Keystone Symposia, a nonprofit organization that coordinates over 50 life science research meetings each year.

I oversee the process of selecting meeting topics and organizers; review meeting proposals and shepherd these proposals through additional peer review by our Scientific Advisory Board; and help raise funds from government agencies like the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The mission at Keystone Symposia is “connecting the scientific community,” so I truly feel like I found the ideal job. And although I could not have anticipated it, I would probably not be CSO at Keystone Symposia if I had

not made the jump from professor to medical writer in 2004.

The transition in 2004 from a tenured full professor in an academic research-intensive position to one where clinical research and writing ruled the work day was pretty dramatic. As a medical writer, I co-authored manuscripts summarizing the results of clinical trials involving vaccines. I was even able to offer input into trial design—although I am not sure that my suggestions ever ended up in any trial protocols. Up to that point in my career, biochemical research had dominated my professional life for over 20 years. Graduate school and postdoctoral training were fun, and as far as careers go, I had only ever imagined that I would be a faculty member at a university.

As I moved through the ranks in my department at the University of Iowa, I received good support from colleagues, enjoyed teaching and interacting with students, and relished research. The decision to change my career stemmed from dissatisfaction with what evolved into a less enjoyable position coupled with the allure of something new. After a few years, I felt like I was treading water scientifically: with a relatively small research budget and a small lab, pursuing new research directions was difficult. On the other hand, I continued to enjoy writing.

I was fortunate to have some serious writing teachers dating back to my “surfer” high school in southern California. (One of our often exasperated English teachers, originally from the East Coast, remarked that



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she felt like she was doing missionary work.) Also, the curriculum at my undergraduate institution, the University of California, San Diego, heavily emphasized writing. I did not recognize then that I was acquiring one of my most important—and very transportable—professional skills.

Once I settled on medical writing as my new career goal, I took steps in that direction. I considered myself a good writer but nevertheless took writing classes to work on the craft. I joined

professional organizations such as the American Medical Writers Association and the Council of Science Editors, and I started attending their meetings. These organizations offered opportunities for training and for learning about medical and scientific writing. My membership also showed a commitment to the profession.

As I pursued a career in writing, I heard the following rule over and over again: to get a job in writing, nothing is better than experience. In my case, I had many scientific papers resulting from my 20-plus years in research. I also sought additional writing opportunities: I wrote a personality profile of another researcher for the medical alumni magazine and had another article published in a regional magazine.

In applying for writing jobs, I tailored my resume to reflect the

positions: depending on the position, I emphasized some parts of my training and experience over others. Attending professional meetings turned out to be key to getting the job at MRL. At one such meeting, I met my eventual boss, and the following week, I was invited for an interview. I learned later that I was hired because of my research and writing experience, oral communication skills, eagerness to learn new material, ability to work in a team, and a commitment to writing.

I was very happy at MRL. My co-workers were bright and highly motivated, the work was interesting, and MRL offered many opportunities for professional development on both the scientific and management sides. This was also my first exposure to real interdisciplinary teamwork, and

I enjoyed that. In fact, I would happily still be at MRL if I had not spotted the ideal job description, for CSO at Keystone Symposia, in a scientific journal.

Because my wife and I had already outlined the perfect job for me, no special preparation was needed to apply for the CSO position. My broad interest in biology, a background in both basic and clinical research, and good communication skills helped me move to the top of the list of applicants.

Looking back, I had no plan that would take me to my ideal job. I did have the nerve to change my career when I wanted to do something new, and I think that I succeeded by taking advantage of valuable—and highly transportable—technical, problem-solving, and communication skills that I acquired in studying for a Ph.D., doing basic research, and teaching. 

Hendrix and Bradshaw Assume New Posts

ASBMB President Heidi Hamm has announced that Mary J. C. Hendrix will replace William R. Brinkley as chair of the ASBMB Public Affairs Advisory Committee and that Ralph A. Bradshaw will assume the post of Society historian.

Hendrix, who is president and scientific director of the Children's Memorial Research Center at Northwestern University, has been an ASBMB member since 1981. She has served on the ASBMB Public Affairs Advisory Committee since 2001 and was president of FASEB from 2001 to 2002.

Brinkley is currently senior vice president for Graduate Sciences and dean of the Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences at Baylor College of Medicine, Houston. He

is a Distinguished Service Professor in the Department of Molecular and Cellular Biology and serves as co-director of the W. M. Keck Center for Computational Biology. In addition to chairing the Public Affairs Advisory Committee from 2000 to 2007, Brinkley served as president of FASEB from 1998 to 1999.

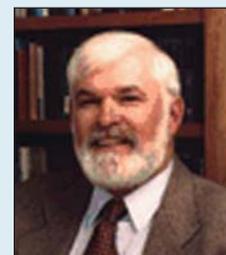
Bradshaw is professor in the Department of Pharmaceutical Chemistry and deputy director of the Mass Spectrometry Facility at the University of California, San Francisco. He has been involved in writing the Society's centennial history book and has also contributed articles on ASBMB history to *ASBMB Today*. Bradshaw has been an ASBMB member since 1971, was president of FASEB from 1996 to 1997, and is currently deputy chair of the Public Affairs Advisory Committee and co-editor of *Molecular & Cellular Proteomics*. 



Mary J. C. Hendrix



William R. Brinkley



Ralph A. Bradshaw