

Australian Biochemist Students' Page

A Day in the Life of a Science Writer

Marian Turner did a Bachelor of Biotechnology (Honours) at Flinders University before moving to Melbourne to do her PhD in the wonderful B cell research program at the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute, under the supervision of Phil Hodgkin. She's most excited about science when she's talking or writing about it, or even proof-reading it. Her internship with Nature News came about after many hours of career thinking, a couple of opinion articles at ABC and newmatilda.com, the fortuitous finding that Nature has a news office in Munich, an email, a cup of coffee and a reporter with 20 years' experience who generously suggested she come in to the office for a trial.



For the last eight weeks I've interrupted my lab work to be an intern reporter with *Nature News*. I've covered the outbreak of *E. coli* that infected 3500 people across Europe and killed 39, and I've developed a soft spot for fungal ecologists and paleontologists. I've got print and online articles under my belt, and I'm hooked!

Everyone's heard of *Nature*, but most scientists associate the name with the research-publishing 'back half' of the weekly magazine. In fact, the 'front half' employs more than 20 full-time journalists and news editors, and the magazine has dozens of freelance writers on its books. This team writes and edits the short news articles and longer feature stories that take up the first 20 pages of the magazine each week, and fills the online site with daily content and an 'up to the minute' news blog. The stories are a mixture of reports on just-published research manuscripts and investigative news covering everything from nuclear accidents to scientific misconduct. I've been interning in the Munich office, where two senior European correspondents work.

Writing a news report on a scientific manuscript is fun – you get to read the science, but you also have to dig a little deeper and find a story to tell. These articles are timed to coincide with its publication in *Nature* or another journal. The news team and editors regularly scan journals' press releases and choose those that are scientifically robust and newsworthy.

To write a story, you need to read the paper well – sometimes there are little gold nuggets in the Methods section or the figures. You'll also often need to read a couple of abstracts of related papers. You always speak with one of the paper's senior authors and find other researchers not related to the research who you hope will be able to comment on the work and its relevance. You need to know the paper well enough to inform them of the new findings (the paper is still under embargo, so they often haven't seen it themselves yet!), and then word your questions so as to encourage some interesting comments – not just 'this is an interesting new development'!

And then you write 600 words. Well, I usually write 900, and then cut it, and mostly realise the 690 I've ended up with are actually better. Sometimes I come up with a catchy headline, sometimes I leave that up to the editor. It goes off to the editor and then the subeditor and it comes

back with various queries on facts that you have to verify are correct. The process happens over 2-3 days.

These stories are great because you get to speak to enthusiastic scientists and learn a lot of interesting new facts and concepts yourself. For example, I wrote about ecologists finding a bunch of new fungi that doubles – doubles! – the number of fungi we ever knew about before.

The other type of news story involves more reporting – on a meeting, an event, or policy decisions – whether that be the impact of a national budget on science research or the ecological effects of the Mississippi floods. The *E. coli* outbreak in Germany in May and June gave me the opportunity to do this sort of reporting.

My internship was already busy, but then healthy adults started dying from bacterial infections in the middle of Europe. Suddenly, I was the German-speaking immunologist intern who was covering the outbreak, trying to get phone time with everyone from intensive care doctors in Hamburg to the head of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. It was important to find angles to the story that were relevant to the *Nature* audience, rather than simply re-telling the stories in the news media on numbers of people infected and the latest vegetable suspect.

It was an intense time, and it was terrible that so many people were so sick. But it felt useful to tell some important stories. I wrote about doctors who, out of desperation to save patients' lives, were starting to trial a drug previously not indicated for infections. And not just any old drug – the most expensive drug in the world. Another piece was about how antibiotic use in agriculture can promote not only the generation of antibiotic-resistant bacteria, but also the transfer of bacteriophage carrying toxin genes between bacterial strains.

One of my stories refuted incorrect statements in the *New York Times* about German doctors inappropriately using antibiotics to treat *E. coli* infections. I'd been talking to those doctors for ten days and it was an honour to write in their defence.

In the *Nature News* publishing process, every story that goes in print or online is worked on by an editor and a subeditor. Print stories are more complex than online stories – the word limit is stricter, as it has to fit to defined page space, and it's preferable to have a data figure or chart

Australian Biochemist Students' Page

to add interesting and eye-catching content to the piece.

The subeditors are responsible for checking facts and making sure the article is in house style, and they sometimes challenge sentences or ask questions in ways that end up making the story much better. During the first two weeks of my internship I read about Fairfax media in Australia planning to sack 80 subeditors and outsource their jobs. I'm only new to journalism, but I can already tell how vital subeditors are to maintaining high quality media, so I was saddened by this news.

Nature News has its main offices in London and Washington DC, and there are journalists and editors in New York, Boston, San Francisco, Munich, Paris and Tokyo. They're continually talking to each other, sharing ideas for new stories and making sure there is enough varied content for the magazine each week. As a reporter, you have to be able to work to tight deadlines, and to switch your brain between concepts really quickly. You are expected to take on assignments from your editor, and also always be on the lookout for material yourself. If you want to write about something, you have to be able to pitch your idea in a way that convinces your editor of its newsworthiness.

I love the work. Talking to scientists is so much fun, and trying to find the really key interesting aspects of a story is continually challenging. It's very satisfying to spend hours researching and getting different perspectives on a story and then sit down in front of the screen and put it all together. I've always enjoyed writing, and the diversity of this work is fantastic for me. I'm also very grateful to the excellent reporters and editors who have spent time showing me the ropes.

I'm not sure what the next few months are going to hold, but I'm pretty sure I want to stay in science journalism or writing. It seems we get on well. Follow me on Twitter @marianlturner if you'd like to see what I get up to, or email at marianturner82@gmail.com if you have any questions. To read the excellent and varied content at *Nature News*, follow @NatureNews or go to www.nature.com/news

This is the last issue of the Students' Page to be coordinated by Chaille Webb. Thanks to Chaille for her outstanding work. The incoming Students' Page coordinators are:

*Casina Kan (casina.kan@sydney.edu.au) and
Mugdha Bhati (mugdha.bhati@monash.edu).*

