Mary Elizabeth Williams, 2020 Alvarez Award Recipient

Elise Eller, PhD / Chair, Annual Conference Program Committee

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, AMWA leadership and staff have been monitoring the conditions and evaluating several possible scenarios for the 2020 AMWA Medical Writing & Communication Conference. The health and safety of all conference participants and AMWA staff have always been our top priority. Given the continuing uncertainty and the clear feedback we received from AMWA members who completed the recent member survey, the AMWA Board of Directors has voted to transform the 2020 Medical Writing & Communication Conference from an in-person experience to a virtual event.

AMWA conferences are known for their warm and welcoming environment and excellent educational offerings. Although the format of this year’s conference will be different, we will provide you with an engaging program and a robust schedule of sessions for you to enjoy. Volunteers and staff have committed a great deal of time and energy to developing the program for the 2020 Medical Writing & Communication Conference, and we will work with presenters to create a special experience for the AMWA community.

Online delivery of educational content is not new to AMWA, and we are committed to offering the best virtual experience for attendees. As soon as we have more information about how, where, and when the virtual conference will take place, we’ll let you know.

We hope you’ll join us for this historic event!

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The Walter C. Alvarez Award is named in honor of Walter C. Alvarez, MD, a pioneer in the field of medical communication. The award is presented to either a member or nonmember of AMWA to honor excellence in communicating health care developments and concepts to the public. The Alvarez Award is presented during AMWA’s Medical Writing & Communication Conference.

I am thrilled to announce that our 2020 Alvarez Award recipient is Mary Elizabeth Williams, author of A Series of Catastrophes & Miracles: A True Story of Love, Science, and Cancer and passionate advocate for bridging the communication gaps among patients, doctors, and researchers. Her writing and advocacy reach thousands of people and highlight the importance of the many forms of medical communication.

As I write this AMWA Journal article in April, we are facing uncertain times because of the COVID-19 pandemic. We have entered a new world, and we don’t know what the world will look like once we get through this pandemic or even when we’ll get through it. Ms Williams can tell us a bit about facing uncertainty and new worlds. Ms Williams, a writer for publications such as Salon and The New York Times, was confronted with a stage 4 recurrence of melanoma in 2011. She chronicled her journey with stage 4 cancer in Salon and other publications, culminating in her 2016 book, A Series of Catastrophes & Miracles: A True Story of Love, Science, and Cancer. I highly recommend this book. Ms Williams describes what it means to be a patient with cancer with humor, generosity, and love. She participated in a phase 1 clinical trial of Bristol Myers Squibb’s investigational PD-1 inhibitor nivolumab (now approved by the US Food and Drug Administration and marketed as Opdivo®) in combination with Bristol Myers Squibb’s CTLA-4 inhibitor ipilimumab (Yervoy®). Ms Williams credits this regimen with saving her life.

Since then, Ms Williams has spent considerable time writing and speaking publicly about cancer, clinical trials, immunotherapy, grief, and the mental health challenges of living with illness. In doing so, she reveals the personal side of living with cancer and participating in a clinical trial. Her story is one of resilience, and it is her hope that her story is part of the conversation to make the health care experience better for all of us. No matter what types of medical writing we do, it is a reminder that underlying our work are the people who step forward to participate in clinical trials.

We are honored to host Ms Williams this year and to hear her story.

Mary Elizabeth Williams is an author and a journalist. She has written for The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, The Guardian, Time, Salon, and numerous other publications. In 2011, after a melanoma recurrence at stage 4, she became one of the first patients in the world to enroll in a groundbreaking immunotherapy clinical trial at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. Twelve weeks later, she showed no evidence of disease, and she has been cancer-free ever since. She chronicled her experience and the science behind it in the National Geographic memoir, A Series of Catastrophes & Miracles: A True Story of Love, Science, and Cancer and continues to work with the cancer and clinical trial community. She is pursuing certification in the Narrative Medicine Program at Columbia University.