

## Medical Writing Doesn't Have to Be Complicated.



This month, I attended the Association of Health Care Journalists Conference in Baltimore. This annual event drew hundreds of participants. Members attended field trips and workshops on the latest medical trends as well as best practices in data mining and interpretation.

## Face Off: Advancements in Tissue Transplants



Photo source: <https://wdef.com/2018/08/14/suicide-survivor-becomes-youngest-face-transplant-recipient-in-u-s/>

Hollywood introduced the concept of face transplants to the mainstream with the 1997 movie [Face Off](#) starring Nicholas Cage and John Travolta. Yet, the idea of removing someone's face and putting it onto that of another person is no longer a far-fetched concept in today's world: In fact, approximately 40 facel transplants have been performed in the world to date, according to expert panelists and

surgeons from Johns Hopkins Comprehensive Transplant Center and the University of Maryland.

The surgeons also shed light on how various transplants affect the patient experience, including lung and penile transplants. For example, the main goal of receiving a face transplant is to improve the patient's quality of life. However, additional goals may vary depending on the tissue or organ being transplanted. In the case of penile transplants, the goals are to restore the patient's ability to engage in intercourse as well as the man's ability to drain his bladder.

Looking forward, experts say the medical community strives to reduce the risk of immunosuppression, or a weakened immune system, and improve the ability to restore the function of nerve tissue, called nerve regeneration.

## **Stem Cell Therapy: The Snake Oil of the 21st Century?**

Stem cells therapy has the medical community abuzz. But what exactly are stem cells?

Stem cells are kind of like blank canvases waiting to be painted: The scientist transforms the stem cells into a finished painting, or mature cells, by supplying them with colorful paint that take these raw biomaterials from blank canvases to beautiful, finished paintings. In theory, these polished Picassos (aka stem cells) become normal, functioning cells that form healthy tissue in the body. Scientists are studying how stem cells may help treat various diseases with injecting these cells into body parts where they will hopefully replace damaged tissue.

However, not all stem cells are the same. For example, pluripotent stem cells that come from embryos can develop into many different types of cells depending on the growth factors and other substances to which they are exposed. On the other hand, stem cells derived from specific tissues or organs in the body are not nearly as versatile: These cells can only develop into a limited range of cells regardless of their exposures to various substances. In other words, pluripotent stem cells could become toe cells or liver cells, but stem cells harvested from bone tissue could only become cells bone tissue produce.

Unfortunately, some organizations have jumped the gun by bypassing the FDA's regulatory process for approving new drugs. As a result, the explosion of clinics offering stem cell therapy as unproven treatments for numerous conditions such as macular degeneration, multiple sclerosis, rheumatism, and aiding in weight loss has become a growing issue.

What's worse is that innocent patients are paying the price with their hard-earned money--and their health. According to the FDA website, one patient went blind following a stem cell injection in the eye while another developed tumor following [a spinal injection](#).

Sadly, these tragedies offer examples of history repeating itself: In the 1800s, snake oil salesmen preyed on the hopes of desperate consumers seeking a panacea for their ailments by selling bogus concoctions of substances that offered no cure. However, consumers had no agency to protect their safety, as the FDA had not yet been formed.

Today, these stem cell clinics have replaced the snake oil salesmen of the past. There are hundreds of clinics falsely advertising stem cell remedies that have not been clinically tested or approved by the FDA. In fact, so many of these clinics have popped up that regulating them all has proven a huge challenge for the agency's small staff. This leaves the task of getting the message out there up to the media and organizations such as the [International Society for Stem Cell Research](#).

In the meantime, the FDA has only approved stem cell therapy for the treating disorders of the blood such as leukemia. Other therapies show promise, but more studies need to be done to determine whether these treatments are safe and effective.

The bottom line? Before visiting any clinic or getting any stem cell therapy, do your homework. Find out if the product has been approved by the FDA or tested. Read more about stem cells and what the FDA's advice for the public [here](#).

## So... What's Next?

This month, I explained why prescriptions may not be ready on time and offered some tips on what to look for when purchasing [dietary supplements](#) in my WebMD column.

I'm also writing about sustainability, sourcing, and quality challenges nutritional supplements for a trade publication. Other projects include creating scientific marketing materials and writing web copy. Look for updates on these and other topics in next month's newsletter.

Until then, stay tuned!



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