published in Selection,
24 February 2025

link to Selection article [1]



A Day in the Life of Helen Cowan, Health Writer, Nurse, and Informal Carer By Tripp Collins. 'A Day in the Life of' is a collection written by members of the Early Career Science Writers Network.

Typical day? There is no such thing for Helen Cowan, who, on any given day, might be in a care home as a practising nurse, reviewing research for an academic journal using skills gained during her DPhil at Oxford University, writing articles about health issues for various outlets, or focusing on her home, where she is the primary caregiver for her partner with a spinal condition. Even though no day is the same, each facet of her life shines light on and informs the others: the writing, the caregiving, and the research.

Cowan began writing while in nursing school, answering a call for a column in the UK Nursing Times with the inauspicious title, View from the Bottom Rung. She wrote seven articles while making her way through two graduations. For the next decade, writing fell to the wayside while she focused on professional nursing. Until, one day, another call brought her back to writing. This time, the British Journal of Cardiac Nursing was looking for qualified reviewers. After a few months in the role, the editor asked if she could write a piece on cholesterol. Cowan was hesitant: “At first, I thought, 'I'm not a writer; I don't really do that.' But I challenged myself, and I've learned to say yes anyway and just do it.” She has now written 85 pieces for the journal.

Reflecting on the role writing plays in her life, Cowan quotes C.S. Lewis: “My own eyes are not enough for me; I will see through those of others.” She adds, **“Seeing through the eyes of others is what the writer can do. It broadens me as a person, and as it does, it feeds into my nursing practice — not only the empathy but the crafting of words.”**

In 2015, Cowan began a regular gig with Reader’s Digest, producing three pieces a month. After decades of consistent writing, she discovered a technique that works for her:

> “I stop halfway. Even when it's really flowing and I've got the structure, and I am really progressing with it, I stop. I might go for a walk or do household duties. I find, subconsciously, my brain is still working on it. Then I come back to the piece with fresh eyes. My best pieces were written when I was forced to stop because of

a care need, and now it's a part of my process."

Cowan is motivated to address stigmas through her writing, especially those related to healthcare. During the COVID pandemic, Cowan organised 1,000 vaccinations out of her home, mostly for the housebound and residents and staff in care homes. She saw firsthand how the most vulnerable members of society felt forgotten by the government. Cowan channelled her frustration and disappointment into her writing. "I needed to write about the situation to address it," she says. This resulted in the piece she is most proud of: 'My Last Shift as a Care Home Nurse', which she wrote for the British Geriatrics Society.

Cowan loved her work for Reader's Digest: she could address the public on critical health issues. But that stopped the week of this interview. Reader's Digest ceased publication in the UK. Cowan says, "I was due to submit my 200th piece, but I got to 199, and it stopped. That's the hardest thing I've experienced in writing."

Despite this, Cowan is determined to find another outlet for her writing. But with so many other demands on her time, why continue? For Cowan, it is a way to make a broader impact.

"I write for the public to inform, inspire, and bring a bit of hope," she says. Cowan takes her advocacy role seriously, using her platform to educate the public about rare but critical medical conditions. Cowan says, **"We can save lives with our writing."**

With Helen Cowan, it's simple—she writes because she cares.

Edited by HennyGe Wichers

Source URL:https://www.helencowan.co.uk/day-life

Links
[1] https://www.absw.org.uk/articles/a-day-in-the-life-of-helen-cowan