Meet ... Neena Bhandari

Neena Bhandari is a freelance foreign correspondent for outlets including SciDev.Net, and a member of the SJAA committee.

What's your current role and what does it involve?

I am a Sydney-based freelance foreign correspondent contributing to SciDev.Net, Inter Press Service and other international and national media outlets. I cover Australia, New Zealand and the South Pacific on a wide range of subjects, including science, health, environment and human rights. For SciDev, my stories focus on how scientific and technological advancements in developed countries can help developing countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

It involves working odd hours, deadline pressures, uncertainty, and sometimes frustration with edits, but nothing can take away the joy and contentment of seeing a good story published.

How did you get into science journalism?

I started my career as a trainee journalist with India's leading national daily, The Times of India. One of my first front page anchor was about smuggling across the Thar Desert on the India-Pakistan border. I travelled and wrote extensively on environment and development issues from the field. It wasn't pure science, but aspects of environmental science, biodiversity, threatened and endangered species and their habitats.

As a foreign correspondent, first in the United Kingdom and then Australia, one is expected to write on a wide spectrum of topics, including science and health, from the country/region one covers. In 2000, I was invited to speak at the international Post-Polio conference in St Louis (USA). Having had lived experience of polio, it opened a whole new world. I have since written extensively on Poliomyelitis and Post-Polio Syndrome or Late Effects of Polio, including for the British Medical Journal.

What does science journalism mean to you?

Science journalism endeavours to inform and explain science in simple and engaging manner to the larger community. It decodes hard science into something that can be understood by a lay reader. It also strives to provide societal and community context to developments in science and technology. Factual accuracy is paramount and so is how data is interpreted, attributed and communicated in a story.

Why is science journalism important?

In the world of misinformation and disinfomation, there is a need for authentic and independent science journalism more than ever before. Every study and finding needs to be tested and evaluated and then put into context in a story. The more evidence-based research we are able to communicate to the larger public, the better

it will be for dispelling untruth.

What recent story or piece of work are you most proud of and why?
The most recent story, I wrote for SciDev, was a feature on the challenges doctors with disabilities face and why medical education and profession should be more inclusive. It is the first story on the topic from the Asia Pacific region. Every person, out of the nearly two dozen people I approached for interviews, was surprised and intrigued with my interest in the topic. But each one of them was certain that the story about this neglected or dismissed problem needed to be told. There was absolutely no data available on the topic so I chose to highlight the issue through medics' lived experience of disability. Since it has been published, I have been overwhelmed with the heart-warming messages from the people interviewed and the wider readership. I do hope it brings about policy changes to make medicine inclusive.

What do you enjoy most about your work?
There is a sense of optimism in doing science and technology stories. I love the challenge, the research aspect, and the cross-section of people I get to meet and talk to. I have been very fortunate to have had the opportunity to travel and write, including on health, from remote indigenous places, including Wadeye in Northern Territory, Tiwi and Melville Islands, Roebourne in Western Australia, Mossman Gorge in Queensland to name a few.
Every dawn is a breath of freshness. Every story teaches me something new. I hope to continue having an impact through my writings, where I connect cutting-edge science with people, who would benefit from it the most.

Read more of Neena's work