

Li Gwatkin

Behind the Mask

August 22, 2022

Barr: Good afternoon. Today is August 22, 2022. My name is Gabrielle Barr, and I'm the Archivist with the Office of NIH History and Stetten Museum. Today I have the pleasure of speaking with Li Gwatkin. Ms. Gwatkin is a Communications Manager with the Office of Research Operations and Planning in the Center for Cancer Research (CCR) at the National Cancer Institute (NCI). Today, she's going to speak about her role in sharing COVID information with the NCI community. Thank you very much for being with me.

Gwatkin: Absolutely.

Barr: Briefly, can you describe some of the key elements of your role at NCI?

Gwatkin: Sure. I'm in the Center for Cancer Research, which is one of the intramural divisions of NCI. As opposed to sending funding out, which about 80% of the budget goes to, we have about 10% of the budget and conduct research ranging from basic to clinical and translational on the three campuses. I manage communications for our division, so communicating externally about our science and trying to help recruit patients and trainees. Then internally, we've got about 3,000 employees on three campuses doing different kinds of research. We've got people seeing patients and people at the bench. There's no one room, even before COVID, that could hold us all at the same time, so communication has always been a little tricky—as has communication with a bunch of scientists who are nose down in their lab work and tend to be very focused. The main tools and channels that I use includes our website, which is ccr.cancer.gov. Then we also have a series of email magazines that we send out or that people can subscribe to. We do a lot of social media—a lot of Twitter—and sending things to NCI and NIH for their social media channels. Then, like I said, I do spend a fair amount of time, especially during COVID, on internal communications. We have an intranet that we do a lot of work on, and then an email newsletter, “60-Second Update,” that goes out every other week. And especially during COVID, we did a series of emails to all staff from our Director, Tom Misteli.

Barr: What is your 60-Second Update like, and when did that start?

Gwatkin: It's been in place since before I started—probably for decades potentially. In theory, it's the news you need to get in 60 seconds in this electronic newsletter. When I took it over, we spent a lot of time trying to really pare it down to the shortest possible and most concise sentence, and then a link to what we call the “source of truth” on the internet somewhere—as opposed to sending an attachment that then might get out of date or people would lose. We also try to add a little bit of “people news.” People always love every time we have photos of people—they get a lot of attention.

Barr: What is it like communicating to 3,000 scientists? They all have very different levels of expertise in their own areas. How do you create content that can be understood and appreciated by such a variety of people?

Gwatkin: I quote Mark Twain a lot: “I could have written a shorter letter, but I didn't have the time.” I try to keep an eye out for, say, a newer employee who isn't necessarily specialized in whatever the topic is, to try to keep the language not too jargon and not too specialty specific. It can really be a challenge.

Barr: For sure. Can you speak about all the resources that you and others on your team helped put together to provide guidance to NCI researchers and staff? You were talking about the intranet page, and there are quite a few resources on there.

Gwatkin: Yes. Everybody went home, but most of our 3,000 people are scattered across 250 labs or branches and doing work that you really can't take home. The first set of information was about the minimal maintenance activities that were allowed, so the things to keep from losing NIH property or scientific value. The first thing was explaining what that meant and how to do it. People, as you might imagine, were really, really stressed out and sometimes frightened and sometimes angry. Again, it's trying to come up with the clear, simple language. There are a lot of PDFs and Word documents flying around as attachments, and we were really trying to corral them in one place, so it was easy to find. We came up with, literally, a red button that says "Coronavirus" or "COVID-19," and then started placing things in categories that we thought made sense. We have a clinical section, we have a lab bench section, and we had a section for fellows. We were updating those multiple times per week—sometimes multiple times per day. Often guidance would come down from NIH or NCI, but it wouldn't be quite right for us since we were conducting the science. We'd have to take that version, and then take it a couple levels more about what it meant for CCR. We tried to do nesting of resources on the intranet. Whenever possible, we would link to an existing resource, so the NIH IRP [Intramural Research Program] Sourcebook got a lot of attention. Sometimes if it hadn't made it into one of those sources, we would post it to our intranet, and then when it did make it to those other ones, we would take our content down and link to the higher one.

Barr: That's a lot to keep track of—all those different sections and updating it so frequently.

Gwatkin: By halfway through the year, when I went to have my mid-year PMAP [Performance Management Appraisal Program] evaluation, it was like, "Okay, I didn't do any of that—none of the goals that I set aside—but I've been really busy with this."

Barr: What are some of the things that you had to amend to fit the CCR community?

Gwatkin: That's a good question. I'll have to think about that. Probably not "amend" so much but add additional material—the definitions of who could report to campus, who needed to, who didn't have to—we had to get pretty specific about that. And specific in different ways for the labs versus in the clinic. Especially with the clinic, our clinical care people, we had to figure out what patients we were going to be able to see, if any, and what we needed to do if they got COVID or they showed up and turned out to have COVID. These are people with cancer, and usually advanced cancer, so we spent a fair amount of time coming up with specific communications for researchers to send to their patients explaining how we're handling this and things they could be doing—so adding more specific detail, given that we were conducting [clinical] research.

Barr: That makes sense. Can you speak about your role in assisting with the Director of CCR's all staff emails and updates?

Gwatkin: Luckily, Tom Misteli, my director, saw that he was going to need to communicate a lot and was open to getting assistance. Our senior leadership has had, three times a week, senior catch-up meetings. I started coming into that at the beginning to cover the communications issues. That was really helpful in that I was able to give my input on a live basis at a regular time. I had counterparts [in other NIH institutes] saying that they really couldn't get hold of their director and didn't have a sense of what was going on, and there wasn't as much communication. But that system worked really well. That group would brainstorm topics for the week, or if a topic came down from NCI or NIH, we would talk about how to communicate it in a way most appropriate for our audience. Half of it was logistical information, and then a lot of it was sort of intangible leadership: "We're

all in this together, we're going to get through it, let's stay focused on the reason we do what we do." My director put a lot of thought into doing that and was also very open to getting edits, so that was a rewarding exercise. He's been a pretty private person, but I think he really stretched himself, putting himself out there in a way that was really constructive. I found that role of helping with the voice, keeping everyone on mission, and trying to keep people calm was actually really helpful in helping me navigate the craziness that was COVID-19.

Barr: Did you hear from other people in CCR on their feelings about these emails or other communications from your director? Did you get any feedback?

Gwatkin: We got a lot of positive feedback. We could tell that a lot of the emails were read, and that the links were clicked on. A lot of times he was linking to resources. He got a lot of feedback via email that there were people who really enjoyed, or were moved or impressed by, the emails. He got a lot of feedback from other Institute Directors and Scientific Directors. We noticed a couple of people doing the same thing afterwards, which is lovely. We got a lot of positive feedback, which is really nice. Sometimes with internal comms [communications], you're sort of sending things out into the void and you have no idea.

Barr: Definitely. Can you speak a little bit about how you integrate evidence-based research and NCI messaging? You've always done that, but you also did that with COVID and links on your intranet page. I saw in the Director's all-staff emails, he always tried to include some links to scholarly things.

Gwatkin: It's communicating with a scientific audience whose reason for being is to advance science—so it's pretty baked in. It's interesting—what I had to educate a little bit about was [the idea of] "We've said this four times already, how do people not know it?" At some point, I was doing a workshop on how to best design websites for the user and they mentioned the idea of the "stressed user"—maybe you're coming out of your car, and you've got a kid on your hip and groceries, and you're trying to open the door and trying to have your email on your phone. It was the idea of keeping it really simple and scannable and then repeating it. That applies to times of crisis when people are stressed out and not necessarily focusing very well. Or you may get a message now about the COVID testing, and you're like, "Yeah, yeah, whatever." Then three weeks from now you actually realize that you need to get a COVID test—and where was that message? It's the kind of simple, repetitive messaging, and explaining the value of that, because you're talking to someone who's a highly educated scientist, and they're like, "Well, I've said it once, why do I have to say it again?" Well, because we are all human, and we're all stressed out, right? You get the information, and you can take in the information when you need it.

Barr: That makes sense. Can you speak about what content was featured and emphasized in the emails and messaging on other platforms, and how you decided what should be on which kind of medium? You have the internet, social media—a lot of different mediums of conveying your method.

Gwatkin: I'd say we didn't really change the content of the majority of our external messaging very much. The research was continuing. Our publishing probably went up a little bit because people were at home, going through their data, and had focused time to work on actually writing their papers, so the publication rates went up a little bit. For external communications, we really stayed the course on what we normally did. Then internally, it was really focused on the logistical information, and trying to keep up with a team spirit and keep up morale. Everybody went through hard times. Our folks were frustrated that they were shut down and a lot of them really couldn't do their work at all. We have about 1,100 fellows, and a lot of those fellowships are time limited, so they were really anxious about what this was doing to their career. They had a certain amount of time where they were expected to get a certain amount of science done to be able to progress to the next level, and here they were sitting at home. Basically, a lot of them were freaking out. We did several townhall meetings

and listening sessions. Also, we were sensing that a lot of the young parents, especially the women, were struggling with the childcare issues, so we did a number of Zoom or [Microsoft] Teams listening sessions on those sorts of things.

Barr: I'm sure that's really beneficial. Do you think that some of those things will continue post-pandemic?

Gwatkin: I do. We did come up with a lot of mechanisms that really strengthened our internal communications and are now sort of baked in, so I do think that those will continue.

Barr: You were talking about keeping up morale—can you talk about some of the initiatives that you had in order to do so? One of them was the CCR Strong initiative in the early days of the pandemic. What gave you that idea and how did you go about implementing it?

Gwatkin: It was definitely not my idea. I think a couple of different people came up with it and then some of our younger staff that are more on social media were making it better. We also got the idea from, early on, my supervisor Mel Bronez. She was always really good about trying to cultivate a sense of team and safeness for our direct Office of Research Operations and Planning. We had a Teams channel where we'd be posting. Then for a while, we sort of organically started [asking questions] like: How are you doing this? How did this go? What was the best thing that's happened to you lately? People would post and it was really therapeutic—or you'd be like, “Oh my God, you're not the only one that's doing X, Y or Z.” Also, some of the listening sessions allowed us to watch people find so much value in recognizing that other people have this thing going on too. We do have the ability to do photo galleries on our websites, and we decided to send out occasional emails and say, “What's bringing you joy right now?” or “How's back-to-school going?” or “Show us your pets.” We got some cool stuff. And then, ten months in, we said, “Show us your babies.” There were a lot of babies.

Barr: There were. They were so cute. What was your experience like working remotely, especially on really big collaborative projects?

Gwatkin: I felt pretty lucky on a couple of different accounts. In my past, I've done a lot of remote working. I was living in Nebraska 15 or 20 years ago, working with people in Virginia on a project in Lebanon. So that I was always very comfortable with it, and then all this Zoom and Teams stuff was an added bonus. It was an adjustment for a lot of people. I think a lot of the managers especially had a really hard time figuring it out. Your entire team is remote. They can't just walk and stick their head in the office. Another thing that helped us is that half of our group is in Bethesda and half our group is in Frederick. We were already doing a certain amount of remote work. Our designers for the CCR Milestones magazine are up at Frederick, so we already had a workflow established remotely. I did lose someone that runs Milestones, right as COVID was starting, and had to hire a replacement. I brought in three staff remotely during COVID and had to bring them up to speed and make them feel like they belong. I'd like to say it's worked really well. They're working well as a team. We're now going in more regularly. But I've worked with a couple of people for over a year, and basically saw one of them once and one of them not at all [in person], so we had to figure some things out. But it went pretty well.

Barr: That's great. You were saying it was mostly on the intranet, and internal was mostly about logistics concerning COVID, and external and your outside media was about cancer research. But what did you do to promote any intramural projects about COVID-19 done by CCR?

Gwatkin: I wouldn't say we were trying to promote them. We did have a large number of them. I do think we were probably the one of the groups that had the most, but we are very careful not to promote things until we have peer reviewed publications—and even then, it's not necessarily our lane. Some of the major projects were

NCI projects, but most of the major projects and messaging was coming out of NIAID [National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases]. We were being careful to stay in our lane there and keep our eye on conducting the science and making sure it was rigorous.

Barr: That's a good plan. I could see how if you did it in another way it could go poorly.

Gwatkin: I worked a lot with getting the approval process together for when people were submitting to be able to do projects, and then to be able to alert people when papers were being submitted for publication. We did have a few instances where some of our international scientists were getting calls from their local media. We had to channel that back to NIAID or negotiate to respond, and that got pretty emotional at times. I had a virologist who had trained at the Wuhan Institute, and who was from the area. His friends, his colleagues, and his family were all there. He was getting calls from the media. He felt a moral obligation to provide his knowledge. We had to explain that, well, Dr. [Anthony] Fauci [then director of NIAID] had to do that. But it was difficult. We had people from India when things were really bad in India, and people from Italy when things were really bad in Italy. You could see how hard it was to not be home. That was hard.

Barr: That sounds really difficult. Can you talk about some of the other challenges you and your team encountered, as well as some of the opportunities and accomplishments that came with the pandemic?

Gwatkin: We did learn a lot about internal communications, and I feel like we're doing a much better job now than we were. People had some really hard personal challenges. I lost an uncle. A woman who worked with me, who was from a very tight-knit family in Miami, was here living by herself and really struggling. We were able to get her home to Miami to work remotely. I was sort of coming up with more flexibility than in the past to help people get through. Everybody had so much stuff going on at different times, so it was kind of learning to flex with that and support each other.

Barr: In what ways do you feel that you've learned how to do internal communications in a better way that you would carry on post-pandemic?

Gwatkin: One way is having the channels set up more robustly. We had the intranet set up, and we did a major revamp the summer before, but it wasn't especially used. When we started posting the COVID information, the use probably quadrupled, and that got people used to going there for a source of information. We've learned about the listening sessions, and that those were working really well. I've got rhythms down for internal emails and trying to really reduce the quantity and length of them, and to push to CCR Central. Also, the realization of just how important it is. The thing we really missed is the opportunity to have what we typically call a junior "boots on the ground" person who can literally run around with an iPhone camera, snapping those fun shots of people in action, or if we've got this amazing patient, go get that photo. We're trying to put more photos on our website to show real people, and that we haven't been able to do. We're starting to, but then everybody has a mask on—or if they don't have a mask on, it's "Oh, wait, what? Why don't you have a mask on?"

Barr: In addition to being an NIH employee, you're also a person who has been living through the pandemic. How has the pandemic impacted you as an individual? You already said, unfortunately, that your uncle passed away during this time. I'm sorry to hear that.

Gwatkin: Other than that, I have felt really blessed that I can do my job effectively, remotely. My job was necessary and stable and meaningful during this. I had a bunch of life events. I sold a house, and it went on the market on the 18th of March. Thank God it sold. I bought another house. I moved. My daughter has chronic health problems, had to go to the ER in the middle of everything. On the way over there, we realized she was 19,

so I couldn't go in with her. Halfway through the visit, she's like, "Mom, the people with the helmets are in the room next door with the tubes." That was kind of the height of the scariness. But they treated her just so well because she was 19, in the ER, and she clearly felt like crap. That ended up being fine. Then she started college and was actually able to go to her campus and live in the dorm and do her college classes from her dorm room. It was really, really hard for her, but she was very eager to get out of the house—and then really proud that she managed to make it through that year. I'd say, you know, silver linings! A lot of people were in touch with each other more—like I now have a Zoom book club that an old friend from Nebraska started. It's a bunch of women from around the country. I've met one of them in person, but we're going to be doing this book club for years. I've gotten back together with my college besties, and I now host a regular Zoom happy hour, which is awesome. I just scheduled one for this week.

Barr: Are you from Nebraska?

Gwatkin: No, I'm here from here, actually. The other good thing is my parents are here, so having them close by has also been good because they're older.

Barr: Well, is there anything else that you'd like to share about either your professional or personal pandemic experiences?

Gwatkin: I don't think so. I'll probably think of something once we hang up.

Barr: Well, thank you so much for your participation, and I wish you and your family all the best.

Gwatkin: Thank you. Same to you.