

Hensley: blogging the health beat

Scott Hensley is a little like digital health journalism's Johnny Appleseed. Having served as the founding editor of the *Wall Street Journal* Health Blog, Hensley left the *Journal* last spring and in August joined National Public Radio, where he serves as a digital correspondent, editor and main writer on—surprise!—the NPR Health Blog.

It's much the same fare as he covered at the *Journal*, though with less emphasis on the business of health-care and more of a general interest slant—a direction that the *Journal* has, in his absence, taken as well. That suits Hensley, who says that one of the joys of being a human content aggregator is the imperative to follow your instincts.

"One thing I learned at the *Journal* that has held up here is that most readers of blogs are coming à la carte," says Hensley. "They're attracted to a particular post they found through search, or maybe someone else linked to it. So, you can have a wide variety of subjects, and they find an audience, or vice versa. As a blogger, that means real freedom to pursue topics I find interesting."

Hensley is impressed with NPR's commitment to expanding its health and science journalism, both in its broadcast division and online. The broadcaster relaunched its website last summer and has brought on extra staff—including Hensley.

Hensley comes to health journalism with an unusual perspective, having started his career with Siemens Medical Systems, where he was head of compliance for the device-maker, designing clinical trials, recruiting investigators, monitoring trials and serving as a spokesman on regulatory issues. Over a decade at Siemens, Hensley noticed that most reporters didn't have a clue about how things worked in

Scott Hensley
*Digital correspondent/
editor, NPR*

2000-2009
Reporter, news editor, WSJ

1995-2000
Reporter, *American Banker*
and *Crain's Modern Healthcare*

1984-1994
Director, regulatory affairs,
Siemens Medical Systems

the device industry. "I enjoyed good interaction with the press, but I felt like a lot of stuff I knew about wasn't covered as well as I thought it should be," says Hensley. "After a while, I thought maybe I should give it a crack, and almost on a whim, I applied to journalism school. I looked at it as a sabbatical. If I didn't like it, I could always go back to the industry stuff."

After earning his master's at Columbia School of Journalism, he landed a job at *American Banker*, where his experience with FDA came in handy covering the Securities and Exchange Commission.

"I didn't see a direct connection, but then once I started doing it, once I substituted patient for investor and doctor for broker, then it wasn't completely nutty having that lens inform my coverage."

Hensley moved on to *Modern Healthcare* before landing at the *Wall Street Journal* in 2000, covering the human genome project and the drug industry. His best work was, he says, "in the parlance of the old *Wall Street Journal*, 'Scoops of ideas.'" In particular, his look at Pfizer's ultimately unsuccessful efforts to develop an anti-aging pill stands out for him. "I negotiated for more than half a year to pursue a story about a research program which Pfizer was excited about but also knew was pretty high risk," says Hensley.

"In the early days, when the data was looking good, they were very eager to talk about the work. Then things got quiet." Here, Hensley's insider perspective came in handy. "I said, 'Look, to me, whether it's a red light or a green light on this line of work is not that important,'" he recalls. "What I want to look at is the process.' I had covered Pfizer for a few years at this point, and I said I really want to take people into the challenges of drug R&D." The result, "Quest for Youth: How Research on Anti-Aging Pill Lost Momentum," was an unusually insightful look at the risks involved in drug development.

"The work required to get access to that and reconstruct what did ultimately turn out to be a project that was killed was very satisfying to me," says Hensley. "To me, this was a scoop where I was able to do something rarely done in this way. I've had others—little things, on deals—but those things don't stick in my mind the way some of the more compelling feature work does." —Matthew Arnold

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