

Exploring the Changing Role of Modern Medical Science Liaisons

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In recent years, there has been a virtual explosion in Medical Science Liaisons (MSLs). Over the next two years, in fact, the number of MSLs is expected to increase globally by 20%.¹

What's driving this growth? According to Dr. Samuel Dyer, CEO of the Medical Science Liaison Society, several factors are responsible. Put simply, stated Dyer, "KOLs [key opinion leaders] are demanding it." Today's thought leaders are looking for detailed information as they engage in clinical conversations with life sciences companies.

Another contributing factor is the growing scientific sophistication of pharmaceutical products, particularly genomics and orphan drugs. Both therapeutic categories tend to be much more complex and technical in nature, requiring scientifically trained medical experts in these discussions. Many orphan drug companies, in fact, are foregoing traditional commercial paths, and instead relying more heavily on MSL teams during pre-launch activities.

And it's not just the largest life sciences companies that are hiring more MSLs...even biotech, veterinary health, and medical device companies are getting into the act. In fact, companies are increasingly seeing the value of leveraging MSLs to educate key physicians in order to reinforce their medical messaging and brand.

Doctors are gaining significant medical value from these conversations. According to Dyer, "the data from a recent survey conducted by the MSL Society revealed the average time a traditional sales rep has with a physician is roughly two minutes, but the average time an MSL gets is about an hour." This is not to say that MSLs are immune to access challenges. With more MSLs than ever competing for the top KOLs' time, MSLs still face many of the same access challenges as field sales reps.

There's no doubt that "times...they are a changing," and no group feels the impact of these developments more than medical. From MSLs to medical affairs directors, challenges and opportunities abound, and the organization that can address both effectively will have a leg up.

Transitioning from Clinical to Commercial to a Middle Ground

The role of the medical team in a life sciences organization has shifted significantly over the years. Traditionally, it was rolled up into research and development, a completely separate entity from commercial. But these days, MSLs are engaging in conversations with physicians that go beyond the translation of science to delve into issues such as health outcomes and the real-world effectiveness of drugs...expanding their scope and adding real value.

Medical executives from Shire Pharmaceuticals and AstraZeneca recently participated in an industry roundtable to discuss the topic. Each agreed wholeheartedly that the role of medical teams looks quite a bit different today than it did even a few years ago.

“Medical affairs now serves as a bridge between our clinical, scientific, and commercial teams, and even helps drive greater patient-centricity,” said Dan DeStefano, head of global medical affairs systems and operations at Shire. “For example, our MSLs have been instrumental in supporting investigator-initiated studies, some of which have produced clinically relevant results that have ultimately led to company-sponsored trials and approvals.”

Glen Martin, senior vice president of medical sciences at Ashfield, a division of UDG Healthcare and global leader in the provision of outsourced multichannel communications added, “Actually, we have found the collaboration of local MSLs in investigator-initiated studies to drive many important initiatives such as label changes, safety updates and establishing new pathways for the development of randomized clinical studies. A local MSL’s insights are truly invaluable to these studies and do much to move results forward.”

At AstraZeneca, too, medical affairs has become a better aligned department. “Our MSL teams contribute valuable information that gives the entire company across clinical, medical, and commercial functional areas a more complete view of the health care practitioner,” said Kevin Krause, PhD, executive director U.S. medical affairs operations at AstraZeneca. “Traditionally, much of this information was largely siloed within each functional area.”

Despite the greater collaboration between medical and commercial teams, it’s a mistake to think of MSLs as a secondary sales force. The job of MSLs is to impart information, not drive prescriptions, so their function is different than that of sales even if both functional areas are striving to build relationships with key stakeholders and influencers.

Measuring and Increasing the Value of MSLs

If the role of MSLs is not to drive prescriptions, how then, does one measure their value? Defining meaningful metrics can be tricky.

A good place to start is by looking at the pre-launch product strategy, and more specifically the scientific communications strategy for medical affairs and aligning it with that of the commercial teams. According to industry panelists, companies can measure the value of MSLs by documenting their impact on strategy execution. Of course, that’s easier said than done.

“A large part of the value of an MSL is in building trusted, science-based relationships with the top-tier KOLs,” explained DeStefano. “One basic way to measure this is by tracking the number of interactions MSLs have with KOLs and what came out of those discussions. Even so, all of this is very difficult to measure or track quantitatively.”

According to Dyer, measuring the value of MSLs will always involve a mix of quantitative and qualitative variables. A quantitative variable may be the amount of face time an MSL spends with a physician (i.e., 30 minutes every two months). A qualitative measure might be the medical insights derived from those conversations, collected in a system that’s easily accessible by other internal teams. Consider a physician who suggests to an MSL that a drug be studied in a

particular therapeutic area or in combination with another drug. Such an insight, while difficult to measure quantitatively, has the potential to substantially impact clinical research and development efforts.

DeStefano agreed. “MSLs show their greatest value in the medical insights they bring in to the organization. Today’s trials and products are more complex so a medically knowledgeable MSL team is often better equipped to help with trial challenges or weigh in on R&D decisions.”

“Not to be overlooked in the discussion of medical insights is the role the MSL can play in competitive intelligence,” noted Martin, “Because MSLs are engaged in earlier stages of clinical development and trial discussions, they are in a position to gather intelligence that can be quite valuable to an organization and its development efforts.”

Dyer approaches the issue of adding value in this way: “One question I ask of every MSL I have ever managed in any country is, ‘What is the *medical* value of you going in to meet with that particular KOL?’” The only real way to know the answer to this question is to ask the KOL, and not every KOL values the same thing. “Some KOLs may be focused on the latest issue of a particular medical journal. Others might be looking for speaking opportunities, and still others might be primarily interested in conducting investigator-sponsored trials,” Dyer continued. “How you go about discovering what a KOL values is simply by asking.”

While there is no universal blueprint for MSL success, some best practices are emerging. Because there’s more pressure on the industry today to demonstrate the economic value of a drug, for example, MSLs are increasingly targeting payers and regulatory agents. The physician is no longer the sole customer. An effective MSL strategy will look at segmenting MSL teams to address all key stakeholders that can affect a brand’s success. It will also need to ensure that MSLs are carefully aligned across all customer-facing teams and channels to help nurture existing KOL relationships and build new customers across markets.

In addition, it may pay to use MSLs more judiciously, depending on where a product sits in its life cycle. MSLs may prove most valuable and effective during the pre-launch phase – which averages about seven years – rather than post-launch. Research points to a greater need for life sciences companies to invest more in pre-launch activities designed to create stakeholders who are already eagerly awaiting the product *before* launch. Here is where MSLs may have the greatest impact and impart the most value.

The most important factor that contributes to the success of an MSL-KOL relationship is communication. Dyer stated, “a recent global survey and report on MSL job performance conducted by the MSL Society revealed that while scientific expertise and relationship management remain core requirements of the role, these competencies are no longer a differentiator and do not provide unique value to KOLs. In fact, MSL managers rate communication skills as the most important competency for success. Physicians are bombarded by vast amounts of information of varying quality. As a result, they desire MSLs who can communicate information that is relevant and valuable.”

Empowering Medical Teams with Cloud Technology

Systematically capturing the insights gathered during interactions with thought leaders is critical to success. Equally critical is finding a solution that specifically addresses the unique needs of the medical team such as how to identify KOLs, build in-depth profiles, and develop meaningful engagement plans.

Integrated cloud-based suites offer many advantages to medical teams, including the ability to bring together the numerous interactions and conversations KOLs have with various customer-facing teams. Doing so provides a holistic view of the KOL so the MSL knows how to expertly tailor all future interactions and develop a trusted, collaborative relationship.

“With a complete view of KOLs, companies gain a strategic advantage,” explained Krause. “We can leverage information to get a better understanding of the KOL which not only helps enhance future KOL interactions but can also aid in setting clinical and research strategies to ultimately enhance patient care.”

Cloud-based solutions can also help break down common existing barriers between functional teams. Traditionally, software technology has consisted of disconnected systems, which prevent the flow of information and ideas. Easily accessible via the web, cloud solutions promote data sharing and allow all parties to have increasingly richer and more personal conversations with the customer.

“Cloud technology has been a huge contributor to this shift towards a larger role of medical,” said DeStefano. “The cloud puts everything out there, available in real time, with platforms that are totally connected.”

DeStefano noted: “Amazon knows more about me than most pharmaceutical companies know about their KOLs. But, as we start to put key opinion leaders at the center of everything and build our systems around how we engage with them, then we can set the framework to simply click a button and see every interaction our organization has with KOLs. This is nirvana in terms of understanding their needs and, ultimately, helping patients.”

The Future Looks Good

Many within the life sciences industry see an even bigger role for medical affairs in the years ahead. “I think medical affairs will evolve to become much more customer-focused,” concluded DeStefano. “And this will be more broadly defined as outreach to healthcare professionals, patients, and even patient communities.”

As KOLs continue to pose accessibility challenges, MSLs looking to create real impact will need the right training and the right technological support. MSLs who have the resources needed to collaborate with other functional departments and the communication skills required for clear, personal, and persuasive discussions will be well-positioned to provide a truly customer-centric experience.

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Sources:

1. MSL Insights. A Global Survey Reveals: The Medical Science Liaison competencies that

contribute most to success. Medical Science Liaison Society. July 2015.

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Robert Groebel is responsible for Veeva's global medical strategy. In this role he continuously is responsible for the overall market strategy for the suite Veeva Medical products and services. This end-to-end solution is designed to specifically engage opinion leaders and healthcare providers with diverse content and across multiple channels.

Groebel has more than 20 years in the healthcare arena, with diverse experience in medical affairs, product management, operations, administration, and staffing. With a focus on thought leader network identification and market activation, he has built a skill set designed to accelerate the successful launch, adoption, and commercialization of medical interventions. He has worked on both the medical and commercial sides of life sciences, bringing a diverse skill set and perspective that is rare among pharmaceutical professionals.

Prior to joining Veeva, Groebel served as head of Commercial Education and Skill Development at Shire Pharmaceuticals.