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The changing role of the modern MSL

In recent years, there has been a virtual explosion in medical science liaisons (MSLs), but what's driving this growth? Several factors are responsible, according to Dr Samuel Dyer, CEO of the Medical Science Liaison Society. Put simply, "KOLs [key opinion leaders] are demanding it," stated Dyer. 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, requiring scientifically trained medical experts in these discussions.

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Moving to the middle ground

The role of the medical team has significantly shifted over the years. Traditionally, it rolled up into research and development, a separate entity from commercial. Today, MSLs are engaging in conversations of a broader scope with physicians, going beyond the translation of science to issues such as health outcomes and the real-world effectiveness of drugs.

"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 Pharmaceuticals. "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."

Measuring and increasing MSLs' value

Measuring the value of MSLs will always involve a mix of quantitative and qualitative variables, according to Dyer. A quantitative variable may be the amount of face time an MSL spends with a physician. A qualitative measure might be the medical insight derived from those conversations, collected in a system that's easily accessible by other internal teams. For example, a physician may suggest to an

MSL that a drug is studied in a particular therapeutic area or in combination with another drug.

An optimal point to begin measuring the impact of the MSL is during the prelaunch period, ensuring the ongoing alignment of scientific communication from medical affairs related to broader organisational goals. Companies can measure this impact and value through the individual feedback and the scientific insights generated by the MSL teams over time.

Although there is no universal blueprint for MSL success, some best practices are emerging. An effective MSL strategy will segment MSL teams to address all key stakeholders that can affect a brand's success. It will also ensure that MSLs are carefully aligned across all customer-facing teams and channels to nurture existing KOL relationships and build

new customers across markets. Yet, it may pay to use MSLs more judiciously, depending on where a product sits in its lifecycle. MSLs may prove more valuable and effective during the pre-launch phase than in post-launch.

Empowering medical teams

Systematically capturing insight gathered during thought leader interactions 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 trusted, collaborative relationships.

"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."

The future looks good

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 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.

Robert Groebel is vice president of global medical strategy at Veeva Systems, with responsibility for its global medical strategy. Prior to joining Veeva, Groebel served as head of commercial education and skill development at Shire Pharmaceuticals.