Good science: The new role of Medical Affairs in an outcomes-focused world

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For years, pharmaceutical companies have deployed their Medical Affairs workforces to help physicians improve patient care through the safe and appropriate use of drugs. While these resources are considered valuable, customers rarely see them as critical to improving population health outcomes.

That's about to change.
Healthcare disrupted

The healthcare industry is in the midst of massive change. Two primary trends are disrupting how scientific data and drug information are used and highlighting how the Medical Affairs workforce can be more valuable to healthcare delivery teams, from supporting administrators making policy decisions in boardrooms to supporting care teams making treatment decisions at the bedside.

Trend 1: Patient outcomes and population health

The healthcare industry is shifting its focus from volume to value. This transition is most evident in the move to measure and reimburse providers based on the quality, not the quantity, of care they deliver. Global healthcare reforms are accelerating this shift by introducing outcomes-based payment models and new care delivery models aimed at addressing population health issues. Socialized medicine systems in Europe, Japan and China are taking a lead in this regard, and are developing new approaches to increasing healthcare effectiveness and efficiency. In the United States, too, alternatives to the traditional fee-for-service model are on the rise.¹

In this new environment, many more parties—from population health clinicians to pharmacists and administrators—are joining physicians in making decisions aimed at improving health outcomes. All of these stakeholders need to know more about the solutions, services and drugs (and the science behind them) that are available. Pharmaceutical companies, through their Medical Affairs workforces, are uniquely positioned to help.

Trend 2: Complexity of care

Scientific advances are making it possible for providers, researchers, clinicians and administrators to define, understand and treat diseases at a more granular level than ever before. In addition to making treatment paradigms more complex, these advances are producing more data than these stakeholders can effectively use. Information overload is likely to get much worse. Accenture research has found that more than 40 percent of life sciences companies surveyed expect to see their data volumes increase by at least 50 percent in the coming year.²

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This is particularly concerning because as the healthcare industry shifts more of its attention and investments to improving patient outcomes, players within the industry are placing more emphasis on the reliability, rigor and relevance of the drug information that underpins so much of their decision-making. That information must be accurate and trustworthy. It must be discoverable. And it must be actionable. Often, it is none of the above. This presents a tremendous opportunity for Medical Affairs to serve as the source of information and insight to improve health outcomes.

Medical Affairs: Stewards of patient outcomes

Against the backdrop of trends and challenges that are now affecting all players in the healthcare ecosystem, pharmaceutical Medical Affairs organizations have an unprecedented opportunity to play a much more strategic role in the delivery of patient outcomes.

While regulatory restrictions will continue to define the nature of the relationships that Medical Affairs can have with customers, pharmaceutical companies can make those relationships broader, deeper and much more meaningful. To do so, Medical Affairs will need to re-imagine every aspect of their roles.

Who are the customers?

Medical Affairs professionals will continue to be a vital source of information for physicians looking to improve the health outcomes of their patients. But they will also drive solutions for a broader network of decision-makers and opinion leaders, including healthcare administrators and business managers, as well as pharmacy and therapeutic committee members at hospitals and health systems. Additionally, they will support other stakeholders such as population health managers, who work with hospitals and health systems to manage the healthcare outcomes and costs of specific patient populations.
What services can be provided?
Ensuring the safe and appropriate use of drugs has always been—and always will be—the most important role for Medical Affairs personnel. But they now have the opportunity to serve as trusted experts to their extended network of stakeholders. Further, Medical Affairs professionals can act as credible curators and connectors of information to treat information overload and help them make better decisions at the point of care. By helping capture, understand and use science from many sources, Medical Affairs can assume a prominent (and largely unfulfilled) role in minimizing complexity and improving patient outcomes and population health.

What skills will be needed?
To achieve a broader reach and greater impact, the Medical Affairs workforce will need deeper scientific knowledge in areas such as population health. Other skills will be equally critical.

- **Collaboration skills** will be important because Medical Affairs field personnel will need to interact with customers, internal teams, and internal and external experts in more responsive and personalized ways, connecting these healthcare ecosystem participants to the information that will lead to better health outcomes. They will need to work with experts inside and outside their organizations to build their knowledge of the complex science now underpinning drug development and the patient journey. They will need to engage with behavioral health researchers and health economists to understand and develop valuable insights into issues affecting population health. And they will need to interact with third-party specialists to understand how new technologies and solutions might be integrated into a broader plan for improving patient outcomes.

- **Judgment skills** will be increasingly important in an environment that is pivoting from volume to value. In many disease areas, for example, the definition of value is not yet clear. As the link between the science of medicine and the business of healthcare delivery, Medical Affairs professionals can serve a strategic role and help inform these value discussions by sharing the most relevant and trustworthy information with healthcare teams. Beyond curating and prioritizing information, these professionals will apply their judgment to determine the best way to help their customers define outcomes and understand the science behind the patient outcomes they seek.
Stewardship in action

One of the ways Medical Affairs professionals can serve as stewards of patient outcomes is by helping healthcare teams tackle issues that threaten to derail achieving the desired patient outcomes. Drug adherence is an example.

Pharmaceutical customers can now access mountains of information about why some patients fail to take their medications as prescribed. Similarly, digital technologies have produced a host of potential tools to improve adherence. Unfortunately providers don’t have the time to sift through these tools and materials to determine the right approach for their patients.

The Medical Affairs workforce can help. First, they can collect, aggregate, and determine the relevance of online and offline information related to adherence. They can add additional value by reviewing anecdotal evidence from their contacts in the field and scouring their own organizations’ clinical trial data for insights and technical innovations that might inform adherence strategies. Armed with the most useful and objective findings, they can help their customers not only understand the barriers to patient adherence, but also devise solutions for overcoming them.

In the workforce of the future, Medical Affairs must:

- Determine the relevance and trustworthiness of online and offline information
- Search for insights that might inform adherence strategies
- Compile data that help their customers understand patient adherence and devise solutions
How can we enable success for Medical Affairs?

Technical and analytical skills will become more important. Accenture research found that 79 percent of pharmaceutical companies intend to invest in capabilities that will streamline and automate some of their knowledge workers’ more time-consuming tasks over the next three years.³ That’s encouraging. The challenge for leaders now will be to balance the technology investments made to support the Medical Affairs workforce with investments made for other workforces.

Technology investments for Medical Affairs—both internal operations groups and field teams—should be focused on the things that will allow these resources to deliver more personalized and more strategic services. Such investments might include solutions aimed at minimizing administrative burdens, analytics capabilities that reveal insights into customer needs and preferences, digital monitoring solutions that enable the mining of new evidence sources, or systems designed to help aggregate insights and information for quicker customer visit preparation. Pharmaceutical companies will need to train internal and field personnel on how to use these new technologies for maximum effect.

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The digital world offers new sources of evidence

According to Accenture research, 57 percent of US consumers accessed a website for medical information last year. One in five (21 percent) used social media for that purpose. And 12 percent turned to online communities.⁴ While the quality of information retrieved from online sources is often general in nature and sometimes questionable,⁵ patients are using their digital findings to ask their doctors and providers more specific questions. That, in turn, changes the types of information pharmaceutical customers seek.

Pharmaceutical companies may want to invest in digital monitoring solutions that allow Medical Affairs to uncover new sources of evidence. Healthcare consumers leave a digital footprint with their online queries and conversations, which means pharmaceutical companies can analyze the behaviors, opinions and concerns that patients demonstrate online. By applying those insights, as well as their judgment skills to identify the trustworthiness and relevance of sources, Medical Affairs can better predict the types of questions patients will ask of their physicians—and the types of questions that pharmaceutical customers may ask of Medical Affairs.

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Shaping the future of health

We believe the opportunity to refocus and enable the Medical Affairs workforce is one of many that will emerge for Medical Affairs organizations in the coming years. To ensure that Medical Affairs continues to deliver the services and solutions that meet customers' growing expectations and demands, pharmaceutical leaders should:

- Rally support across the organization for a new Medical Affairs vision.
- Constantly evaluate their medical strategies, as well as the roles and resources they will need in the future.
- Invest in the skills, technologies and training that will ultimately bring that vision to life.
- Measure the effectiveness of Medical Affairs efforts so that the services, channels and tools that are available to customers can be continually refined and improved.

Science does not stand still.

Neither can pharmaceutical manufacturers' Medical Affairs organizations. It’s not too early for pharmaceutical leaders to start thinking about how they can position their Medical Affairs organizations to have an even greater impact on the healthcare ecosystems they serve. Refining the role of Medical Affairs from disease and product specialists to curators and connectors of outcomes-focused information is a first step in that journey.

The second step is equally important. It calls for leaders to honestly assess their workforce’s capacity to make the transition. Do they have the right number of customer-facing and operational resources to deliver against the new Medical Affairs imperative? Do they have the right talent and skill sets to address the growing B2B nature of customer interactions? And how will Medical Affairs measure its success?
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