

Moving to an integrated, **Holistic Approach to Insights-related Activities** in Medical Affairs

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Introduction

The importance of medical insights is well recognized across the pharmaceutical industry as a key driver for informing and shaping strategy and tactics. To gain a better understanding of this pivotal Medical Affairs activity, the Medical Affairs Professional Society (MAPS) conducted two membership surveys specifically addressing insights. The surveys highlighted a wide variation in how companies approach medical insights, without any obvious areas of best practice or common frameworks in use despite the current recognition of the importance and relevance of medical insights. The survey results indicate the need to identify a common framework across Medical Affairs for insight-related activities (i.e., insights or information generation, curation, collation, reporting, and utilization). Establishing such a framework is necessary to optimize medical insights' impact and value in a broader organizational strategy.



This paper explores how moving from a fragmented approach focused on individual Medical Affairs channels (e.g., MSLs or Medical Information) to a more holistic, multi-channel, integrated approach to insights will create value for the organization, as well as for patients and the medical and scientific community.

Defining medical insights

Clear definitions are essential, and while many definitions of insights exist, we have used the following:

“An insight is new information, understanding, ideas or perspectives on topics relevant to a company that may identify a gap, and/or inform strategy, and/or confirm pre-existing views held by the company and may result in an action where and when appropriate.” - Insights Glossary, MAPS, 2020

The purpose of Medical Affairs insights-related activities is to build a better understanding of the needs and drivers of the behaviors of patients and healthcare professionals so that strategies and tactics can be tailored to address the needs of these stakeholders in the most effective way.

Several aspects of an insight must be acknowledged to ensure a common understanding. These include:

- Insights can be exploratory (i.e., identifying new directions) or confirmatory (i.e., confirming perspectives or the utility of chosen approaches)
- A single insight may have both local and global relevance
- An insight may have an impact at an isolated moment in time or over a prolonged period
- One local relatively insignificant insight may become globally significant as identical or similar insights are seen across multiple geographies.

Such complexity will influence how insights are reported and highlight the importance of developing a robust global strategy in Medical Affairs' approach to insights-related activities. Given the increasingly vast array of data sources available (see Table 1), the framework around which data and information are collected and analyzed becomes essential. Ultimately this framework should focus on the content relevant to the end-users of insights (e.g., content around diagnosis or dosage and administration) rather than on the channels through which data was collected (e.g., MSLs or advisory boards). Such an approach requires agreement on internal criteria to identify insights with the highest value for the organization, for example, those considered to have the most significant potential to influence disease area, therapy area, or product strategy. A fit-for-purpose framework that recognizes a complex nature of insights will significantly help integrate data and information, particularly in large and complex organizations.

Insights are a cornerstone of the Medical Affairs value proposition

Throughout both development and commercialization of novel drugs, there is a paradigm shift within the pharmaceutical industry towards increased recognition of the opportunity and importance of developing a richer understanding of the needs of external stakeholders, including patients. Medical Affairs is an essential leader in this process. As an externally-facing, non-promotional group within a pharmaceutical company, Medical Affairs has the unique ability to integrate perspectives and information from all external and internal stakeholders and engage with patients and healthcare professionals at all stages across the lifecycle of a medicine.

“Medical Affairs stands to be one of the most strategically important and valued functions in a pharmaceutical company, as the nexus of cutting-edge medical, scientific and patient-centered insights that drive strategy and innovation throughout the entire product life cycle.”ⁱ

ⁱ McLoughlin and Croft (2018), Medical Affairs 2025, The Future of Medical Affairs', Kinapse 2018

Looking beyond field medical for medical insights

For many companies, activities driven by Field Medical (FM) or Medical Science Liaisons (MSLs) appear to be the focus of insights generation, with a lack of systematic integration of insights generated across different Medical Affairs functions and/or generated through multiple channels. This was supported by the MAPS surveys which highlighted the fact that many Medical Affairs organizations consider insights to be limited to what FM/MSLs gather from stakeholders through external engagement. This perspective unnecessarily limits the scope and value of what is possible for an organization in the realm of insights. While some sources of information and insights are more accessible than others, every organization should attempt to consider all external interactions (virtual, in-person or digital) across all Medical Affairs functions, as well as additional channels such as published literature, social media, and other sources as potential opportunities to gather insights.

“Considering MSLs and Medical Information as the only sources of generating Medical Affairs insights unnecessarily limits the scope and value of what is possible for an organization in this area.”

- Matthew McLoughlin

Table 1:
Non-exhaustive list of Medical Affairs sources of insights

Medical Information
FM/MSLs
Therapy Area external engagement (including Advisory Boards)
Health Economics and Outcomes Research (HEOR) external engagement (including Advisory Boards)
Medical Education
Patient interactions
Published sources in the public domain (including published papers and conference reports)
HCP and patient focused social media discussions
Patient, physician and KOL surveys

“Traditionally Field Medical would provide customer feedback and knowledge to their line managers who would then have to figure out what to do with it. However, as Medical Affairs has evolved and become a critically important externally facing organization, it is vital that we leverage all appropriate Medical Affairs functions and channels in insights-related activities. The opportunity for what we can collectively achieve as Medical Affairs is vast and extremely exciting.”

- Milana Zivkov

In addition, technology that enables the automated search and analysis of structured and unstructured quantitative and qualitative data is much more widely available than it was five years ago. Many AI/NLP software offerings and the lexicons on which they are based have now been tailored to the unique requirements of the life sciences industry. The evolution of the enabling technology not only allows activities such as ‘social media’ listening but also enables similar analysis of external publications, internal data sources, AE reports and other sources of unstructured qualitative data.

However, technology is only a means to facilitate an integrated approach to insights generation and reporting across Medical Affairs. Ideally, Medical Affairs should aim to develop near-real time reports to enable agility of product teams in proactive use of insights to shape strategic planning as well as tactical activities.

What can we learn from MAPS Insights survey results?

Recognizing the increasing focus of the Medical Affairs community on medical insights, the MAPS Insights Focus Area Working Group (FAWG) conducted two surveys in March and April 2020:

Survey One: focused on demographics, Medical Affairs roles involved in medical insights generation and the prevalence of dedicated insights in Medical Affairs

Survey Two: focused on the specific insight functions within Medical Affairs organizations, their approaches to insights generation, and the storage, sharing and use of insights within different companies.

A summary of key findings is detailed in **Figure 2** below and the results are available in detail in the MAPS Elevate article: <https://medicalaffairs.org/insight-survey-learnings-2020/>



Wide variation in how companies approach medical insights

The survey brought into focus the wide variation in how medical insights-related activities are planned and implemented across Medical Affairs organizations. Approximately half of the survey respondents have a Medical Affairs function focused on insights; however, standalone Medical Insights functions are relatively infrequent and exist in less than a third of respondents' organizations. Some organizations regard Medical Affairs insights as an add-on to more comprehensive competitive intelligence and market research exercises led by Commercial. Companies with more mature capability tend to look to the Medical Affairs organization to provide input and drive the development of a cross-functional strategy founded on credible and comprehensive insights on patient, carer and HCP needs and value drivers. A robust understanding of the evidence gaps and requirements of external decision-makers is also critical for shaping insights-related activities within an organization.



Optimizing the impact of insights from Medical Affairs

There are not that many case studies or examples of best practice available to identify what “good” looks like in Medical Affairs insights-related activities. What we currently see in the absence of such an approach is that digital technology is too often the first reference point when companies attempt to focus on insights generation and, without the necessary process and understanding the investment in technology, is often premature. Therefore, there is an opportunity to identify key steps that can be applied regardless of the size of the function or organization.

A key part of the insights process is to create a closer link and feedback loop between people working at the customer interface and those setting strategies. This requires an understanding of who needs what insights across the organization - from therapy area, product, geographical and functional perspective - to generate actionable insights, share them, and utilize them proactively.

Moving to a more holistic approach in insights-related activities in Medical Affairs

Insights-related activities are complex and of high strategic value to Medical Affairs. To ensure a successful approach to Medical Affairs insights-related activities, the following points should be considered:

- Identify critical gaps in key customer perspectives as well as focus areas of interest driven by intrinsic factors such as:
 - product life cycle stage
 - key external events such as registration or launch
 - key data disclosures
 - environmental events (e.g., impact of a new treatment guideline, change in treatment paradigm)
- Identify all Medical Affairs functions involved in insights-related activities
- Identify the available channels, and use as broad as possible combination of channels to gather information from the external environment
- Embrace the technology available to collate, curate, analyse and interpret that information
- Consider how to integrate information and insights which have originated from various sources. This integration is necessary to build as deep an understanding as possible of the experiences, outcomes, behaviors, needs and preferences of external stakeholders, including patients, those involved in decisions on their care and medication choice and access
- Identify insights-related actions and impact, and ensure longitudinal follow up wherever appropriate
- Establish a process for sharing generated insights/actions/impacts across Medical Affairs and the wider company where applicable
- Ensure feedback loops to insights originators are effective
- Integrate insights into ongoing operational and annual planning activities of product teams.

Conclusions and next steps

This paper looked at key questions raised by the MAPS surveys. As a next step we propose to address in more detail a basic operational model for Medical Affairs insight-related activities and test the proposal through a series of interviews with Medical Affairs leaders across the industry. Defining such an operational model would be a step forward in optimizing Medical Affairs driven insights-related activities, which represent a fundamental part of the value proposition of Medical Affairs.

