

To Surf or not to Surf? Accessing Reliable, Accurate Medical Information

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Abstract

Today when we want information we search the Internet, but is that always the best option? This article discusses Pharmaceutical Medical Information Services available to Healthcare Professionals as a reliable, accurate, evidence-based alternative for information. Provision of these services is required by regulators and they answer specific questions with applicable publicly available information as well as unpublished data not readily available in the public domain. These services offer a convenient alternative to the internet, and provide timely information in a range of formats through traditional as well as digital media. This service is continually evolving to meet the changing needs of customers utilising available technologies. An example of this is a single gateway now available with contact details and links to Medical Information services from different pharmaceutical companies across Europe.

Keywords Medical information; Medicines; Health care professionals; Safety; Pharmacovigilance

Introduction

Medical Information services- An alternative to the Internet?

Many Healthcare Professionals (HCPs) and patients now turn to the internet to find the information they require, only to be presented with pages of results [1]. From these results, it can be difficult to filter the correct information from the incorrect, and the answer may not be clear or address the specific question. Other options do exist. Pharmaceutical Companies offer reactive non-promotional scientific services to answer questions about the products they market [2]. These Medical Information services are available through different channels (including both digital and traditional options) making them a convenient way to access accurate, reliable, scientifically based and up to date information about medicines. However, based upon the numbers of HCPs and patients compared with the volume of questions to Pharmaceutical Medical Information services, it may suggest that many HCPs and patients are unaware of the service that these companies provide [3].

Pharmaceutical Company Medical Information staff are trained information professionals, mostly pharmacists, scientists or doctors, with access to factual and current information on their companies' products. This includes publicly available information as well as unpublished data not readily available in the public domain. This

information may be shared reactively in response to questions from HCPs to facilitate the safe and effective use of medicines [4].

HCPs, patients and caregivers who are unaware of these Medical Information services, tend to still surf online to find information from sources that are not connected to the manufacturers of the medicines [3]. The information they find may not be entirely accurate, complete, or tailored to their specific question. Pharmaceutical Companies aspire to provide high quality Medical Information services to meet customer needs. This article provides an overview of what these services can offer, the scope of the services, how they are regulated and how they are evolving to meet future needs. The aim is to increase awareness about Medical Information services and their value.

Medical Information Services today: Value above and beyond a regulatory requirement

For many years, legislation has required Pharmaceutical Companies to provide a scientific service to answer customer questions about their medicines. These services were first offered as far back as the 1950s. Despite this fact there is no single regulatory document specifically about Medical Information services with multiple regulations, laws and codes needing to be consulted. The EU directive requires [2]:

Marketing authorization holders have to establish a scientific service in charge of information about the medicinal products they have placed on the market (Article 98. EU Directive 2001/83/EC)

Persons qualified to prescribe or supply medicinal products must have access to a neutral, objective source of information about products available on the market (EU Directive 2001/83/EC (52))

Correspondence, possibly accompanied by material of a non-promotional nature, needed to answer a specific question about a particular medicinal product are not considered advertising of medicinal products for human use (Article 86 EU Directive 2001/83/EC)

Information supplied to users should provide a high degree of consumer protection for the correct use of medicines on the basis of full and comprehensible information (EU Directive 2001/83/EC (40))

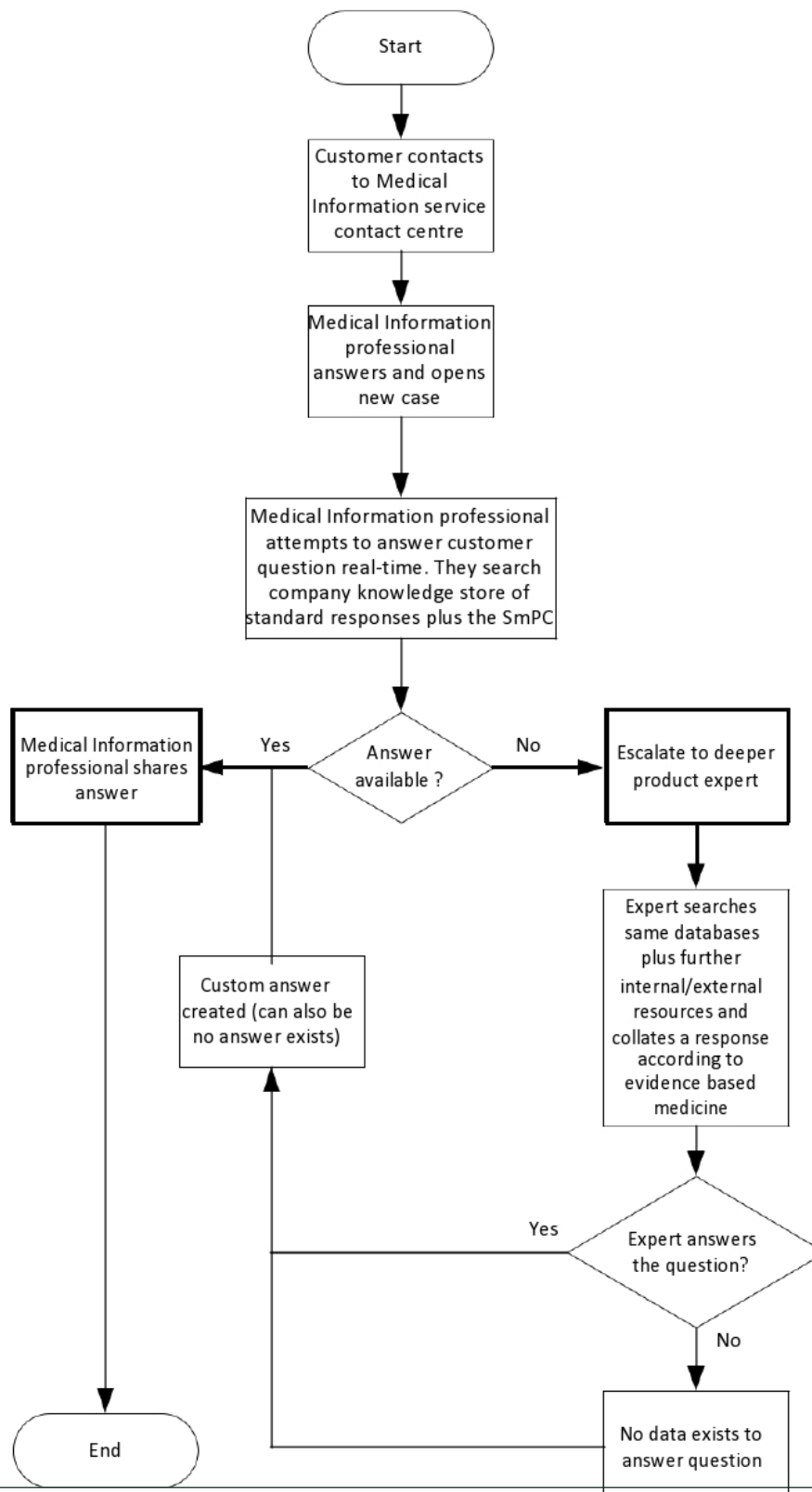
The Good Pharmacovigilance Practice framework [5] includes requirements for Medical Information services. This means that the services are included within the scope of regulatory inspections of Good Pharmacovigilance Practice.

Although regulation, knowledge and understanding has evolved and changed over time, responding to unsolicited requests for medical and scientific information continues to be the major role of Medical Information services. Figure 1 outlines the process that is generally followed for answering unsolicited questions. Superficially, this function may appear to be redundant in an era where information can be obtained at the click of a button, but company Medical Information services provide specific tailored answers, are able to access and provide information beyond that available in the public domain and can also be sourced through digital technologies. Medical Information services have access to experts and information from all departments across their companies and are permitted to provide information not approved under a medicine's license (so called "off-label" information) to HCPs, where appropriate. Most Medical Information services are only able to provide information from the approved label (the Summary of Product Characteristics or SmPC) or Patient Information Leaflet to patients. If patients, ask for further information they are always advised to consult their doctor or other Healthcare Professional [4].

Medical Information services, by the nature of their scientific exchanges with customers, have extensive access to real world experience regarding their company's medicines. From interactions with customers the insights gained contribute to building a comprehensive picture of how medicines are prescribed and used to meet the needs of patients. Medical Information will often identify and communicate product issues or unmet needs through observing an increase in questions relating to a specific subject. Medical Information services are also well placed as a conduit for Pharmacovigilance to identify potential safety signals arising from Adverse Event reports [5]. Analysis of Medical Information requests can also uncover areas where further medical education may be required for HCPs and /or patients. Medical Information services are a link to receiving important new information especially during the launch phase of a medicine. When a medicine is newly launched, often the information available through the usual sources such as scientific journals is limited. Facts relating to mechanism of action or efficacy may not be widely known and Medical Information are the channel that provides the answers. These questions also come to Medical Information indirectly through Sales representatives, Medical Scientific Liaisons, Regulatory Affairs, Health Outcomes and numerous other departments. Medical Information responds to them all.

Medical Information's interactions with HCPs and patients generate useful insights into medicine use [6]. Medical Information often identifies potential side effects or adverse events that may have occurred during treatment. Close collaboration between Medical Information and Pharmacovigilance ensures that Medical Information reports safety information to Pharmacovigilance, and that the responses communicated by Medical Information include a balanced safety profile of the medicine in question. In addition, insights from Medical Information also inform medical strategy and identify information gaps.

Medical Information interaction



Medical Information Services—adding value

Medical Information services are a source of prompt scientific answers to unsolicited medical questions from HCPs and patients in optimized formats and through their preferred channels [3]. As Medical Information requests are unsolicited, they offer opportunities for HCPs to fill gaps in understanding and uncover weaknesses in product communications for companies. To build on this value, many Medical Information services are starting to introduce changes to become more easily and promptly accessible through different digital channels including the web, chat or social media [6,7].

In terms of quality, Medical Information services, as representatives of their scientific and clinical colleagues developing medicines, have access to unique sources of data that are not available elsewhere. The procedures followed are robust to ensure specific and high-quality evidence-based answers which do not go beyond the question asked. This together with the combination of scientific knowledge, expertise in information sources and content management skills enables Medical Information services to provide specific, balanced, up to date answers that help HCPs to make informed decisions without information overload.

These Medical Information services can ensure wide coverage, providing answers to questions related to any aspect of a particular medicine (from safety to off-label uses), across the full spectrum of customers (from prescribers to payers/insurers to patients) throughout the entire lifecycle of a product.

Medical Information of the Future

Over the last 5 years there has been an increasing demand from both HCPs and patients to receive medical information where, when and how they want it [6]. The environment continues to change and evolve. There are ever-increasing demands on HCPs time and hence shorter more concise targeted responses to questions are required. There is less demand for detailed reviews of data and a greater appetite for a summary of facts covered in a few bullet points or graphic. Patients are also more informed, increasingly request information about medicines and are becoming more organized, with patient advocacy groups having a greater voice in the healthcare arena [8].

This change in HCP access to information is reflected in the different channels HCPs are using to access information. Data from a benchmarking report by Merchants shows that for those born before 1980 telephone is the preferred channel for information gathering, whilst for Generation Y (1981-1999) internet and social media are the preferred channels [9]. The demands of both HCPs and patients are challenging Medical Information services to review the format of the information they provide and make it concise and to the point, so it can be quickly assessed. The use of infographics is increasing in situations where a complex pathway or mechanism may need to be communicated more clearly than is achieved with plain text

Advances in digital technology are also helping to meet these demands with self-service access to prepared responses for HCPs being available in certain countries and circumstances. Chat functionality is also increasingly being offered by companies to provide Medical Information. Companies are further investigating the opportunities presented by Artificial Intelligence. With the recent announcement in the UK of a deal between the NHS and Amazon for use of Alexa to provide NHS official information Alexa will soon be providing Health related advice [10]. Alternatively, there is a real possibility that robots

could advise and discuss with doctors to inform their prescribing decisions. In the future, even Google as we currently know it may be redundant! For medical information currently, the focus is building understanding of HCP and patient needs in the digital era and how these needs can be met within regulatory constraints.

MILE a positive step towards the future

In March 2018 a group of Medical Information Leaders in Europe (MILE) officially formed a professional association which aims to share knowledge and best practice around the function of Medical Information in Europe with the overall goal to continuously improve access to information about medicines for HCPs.

MILE now has more than 15 of the top 20 Pharma companies as members. MILE facilitates collaboration internally between its members and externally with partners such as EFPIA (European Federation of Pharmaceutical Industries and Associations) to develop and operationalize new initiatives to address common issues or opportunities relating to the provision of Medical Information services.

A key focus of the MILE association is to develop innovative methods for access to medical information.

MILE aims to attract Pharmaceutical Company Medical Information leaders with passion to drive positive change for the benefit of all stakeholders. Key benefits of this are:

- Networking and sharing best practice

- A voice for Medical Information in Europe with other industry associations

- Leveraging new technologies for future generations of customers

- Defining industry standards & shaping the Medical Information profession in Europe

- Three projects have already commenced from MILE's discussions and are progressing well:

- Raising awareness of Pharmaceutical Company Medical Information services: This paper provides a starting point for communication to a wider audience of HCPs regarding the breadth of scientific, non-promotional information available about the use of the medicines and devices the industry develops and markets.

- A single EU industry portal to provide a single point of entry for HCPs wishing to access medicine related information. This portal, European Medical Information Gateway provides contact details for Medical Information Services for different companies. This is available through www.migateway.eu. This will be a valuable tool for HCPs wishing to access reliable, unbiased information regarding approved and investigational medicines. In this first phase European Pharmaceutical Company Medical Information Service contact details, mapped by country and medicinal product, are available in a single place.

- Principles and considerations for Medical Information communication of safety data: With the volume of information available through the internet, social media and other more traditional sources it can be difficult to filter and find the information required. If it is safety information this can have risks for the patient. Pharmaceutical Companies have a large volume of safety related information about their products but can be conservative in the information provided in response to ad hoc safety related requests.

This team, including representation from the EFPIA Pharmacovigilance working group, have published principles and considerations for communicating safety information in response to unsolicited requests from HCPs to facilitate sharing of safety information for optimal patient outcomes [11].

MILE continues to grow and is now looking at the next opportunities as it defines its strategy and role for the future. MILE aspires to help shape the future of Medical Information in Europe [12].

Conclusion

In conclusion, Medical Information services provide a valuable service to hundreds of thousands of HCPs and patients across Europe yearly, however in relation to the number of HCPs and patients there are still many who do not use these services. Medical Information services are available to all, communicating evidence-based treatment information to support the safe and effective use of medicines to facilitate better health and patient outcomes. Medical Information services continue to evolve to meet customer demands utilising technological advances.

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