GUEST EDITOR'S NOTE: SPECIAL SERIES ON MEDICAL COMMUNICATIONS

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I AM PLEASED TO introduce a series of topics specifically dedicated to the practice of medical communications. Within the pharmaceutical industry, medical communications is a term that encompasses the practice and provision of drug and/or medical information to health care professionals and/or consumers. The genesis of this series of articles was the vision of Tom Teal, editor-in-chief of the *Drug Information Journal*. In March 1999, Mr. Teal suggested a special issue dedicated to the practice of medical communications. This was in recognition of the many individuals, several of whom are contributing authors to this issue, who have participated in and led the DIA-sponsored Annual Medical Communications Workshop for the past 11 years.

Preceding the establishment of a fruitful long-term relationship with the DIA in 1988, a medical information subgroup initiated a series of meetings with several medical information professionals across the industry, hosted by Ed Collins (Burroughs-Wellcome) and Jay Bauman (Glaxo) in Research Triangle Park. From there it was the establishment of the DIA Medical Communications Special Interest Area Committee, under the guidance of Tom Teal, that led to the development of a highly professional association of many industry-based medical information prac-

tioners, who as a collective organization have played a significant role in the advancement of this specialty practice within industry.

I am pleased to recognize the following individuals, from the past and present, for their outstanding leadership during their tenure as program chairperson for DIA-sponsored Annual Medical Communications Workshops: Robert Bell, Jack Boyland, Tony Murabito, Teresa Dowling, Jack Modrak, Fred Salter, Maureen Garritty, Robert Baker, Bonnie McKeon, David Domann, and Tom Gesell. This group and several other long-term members, including Donna Morgan, David Graves, Kirk Hoffman, Sandy Kline, Ernest Gurwich, and Robert Moss, have been instrumental in repeatedly bringing together programs that have served industry-based medical information practitioners well over the years. I would also like to recognize Lori Risboskin, DIA manager, Program Planning and Development, who for the past 11 years has been the anchor in shepherding the DIA Annual Medical Communications Workshop from a program plan to a reality. We look forward to watching the newer membership of the DIA Medical Communications Special Interest Area Committee continue to develop and deliver outstanding programs and topics to the community of industry-based medical information practitioners.

I would like to thank all the authors who contributed valuable papers to this issue. A special thank you to Romana Slavik and Jennifer Dill for their outstanding assistance in

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organizing and reviewing manuscripts generated from the Residents Poster Session presented at the medical communications workshop for the past two years.

As there is a scarcity of articles on the practice and provision of industry-based medical information, the 23 papers in this issue of the journal may well represent the most complete body of knowledge published in this area. The series addresses a wide range of topics, most practice- and experience-based. Throughout the series the reader will notice several themes:

1. Despite the practice of industry-based medical information being in a regulated environment, it is not overregulated to the extent that health care practitioners cannot, through proper channels, receive objective information and answers to product-related questions,
2. The practice of medical information is expanding to include many internal customers, for example, sales training, regional medical liaisons, and managed care business units,
3. Although there are some differences in the scope and extent of industry-based medical information practice outside of the United States, the basic tenets are similar in other countries, and
4. Evaluations and analysis of industry-based medical information practice reveal evidence of recognition of significant contributions as part of the portfolio of products and services that the pharmaceutical industry offers to the health care community.

The series kicks off with "The Core Curriculum for Medical Communications Professionals Practicing in the Pharmaceutical Industry." This paper captures the essence of material that has been in the one-day annual training course, held each year for the past five years in conjunction with the Annual Medical Communications Workshop. The material is designed for professionals new to the practice of industry medical information. Guiding principles and practices around key activities in delivering quality medical infor-

mation in a regulated environment are the foundation upon which this course is built. Within this context it is important to point out that, although presented as general practice guidelines, it is incumbent on each industry-based medical information group to develop its own policies and practices that align with the company's policies and objectives.

The next set of articles address the medical, legal, and regulatory considerations when responding to inquiries from consumers and health care professionals. This topic always generates interest because this area often establishes the boundaries in which industry-based medical information practice resides. The respective authors have presented some useful guidelines for consideration; however, it is the discussion and establishment of company-specific guidelines with in-house or external regulatory and legal consultants that is critical for medical information departments.

Operational issues within medical information departments (ie, preparing for product launch, telephone triage systems, and improving response times) are the focus of the next few papers. All the authors present information that readers may use to benchmark against their own operations.

Following that are several articles that explore the expanding role of the medical information professional either through direct interaction with field medical departments, internal business units, advancing technology, or through establishing an organizational structure that improves communication and efficiencies between internal departments. As industry-based medical information departments continue to gain visibility within their companies, these types of services and changes in organizational structures will become commonplace.

The next group of papers looks at medical information services from global perspectives. First there is a paper on the provision of global services from a United States-based company, followed by three papers that describe the scope and types of services provided by global companies with medical information departments in Canada, Europe,

and Japan. As linkages and information sharing between country-based medical information units within a respective company continue to grow, overall efficiencies and improved quality of information will be realized.

As more demands are placed on the industry-based medical information departments, both from a resource perspective and an employee career development perspective, there will be a need to look at alternative methods for resourcing and ways to provide the staff with opportunities to stay current with pharmacy and medical patient care issues. The next group of articles address some of these issues: outsourcing services, establishing a combined industry/academia residency program, and establishing an off-site clinical rotation for professional staff.

Evaluations, primarily from an external customer satisfaction perspective of industry-based medical information practice, have previously appeared in the literature. The authors of the next set of papers have expanded upon previous work with customer satisfaction and practice standards surveys, surveys of internal customer awareness, and methods to increase the awareness of the medical information department within the company.

The last paper in this series addresses issues that need to be considered when two medical information departments are caught up in a merger. A stepwise process is presented based on the experience and insight of the authors.

MOVING FORWARD—CHALLENGES FOR MEDICAL COMMUNICATIONS

As the practice of industry-based medical information advances, there are several considerable challenges ahead. Technology may well be first on the list. With the continued deployment of Web-based applications and connectivity requirements for information

sharing within global companies and with external customers, considerable resources will need to be allocated to achieve desired results. Competition for capital funds within individual companies to invest in such technology will have a significant impact on medical information departments. The regulatory and legal environment will continue to establish the boundaries for industry-based medical information practice. As regulatory agencies review and alter their policies in this arena and as legal issues may affect this specialty practice within industry, it is imperative that medical information departments develop a close working relationship with the company's legal and regulatory departments. Policies and practices that minimize risk, yet continue to provide the objective and scientifically-balanced information that is requested by health care providers and ultimately used for patient care, will become increasingly important. Finally, the required skill sets necessary to perform this specialty practice in industry will continue to grow. Pharmacy and/or medical education and experience are the cornerstone of current practitioners; however, added to this are necessary skills in application of computer technology, regulatory and legal risk management, understanding business goals and objectives, highly developed communication techniques and know-how, and resource management. Added attention to recruiting, hiring, and career development will be an absolute must in the future. We trust that future DIA Medical Communication Workshops and articles in the journal will explore these issues with respect to the practice of industry-based medical information and medical communications.

On behalf of the Drug Information Association, we are grateful to each of the authors and reviewers for sharing their experiences with the journal readership. We hope that you find this special series of articles informative and of value.