Handling Medical Information Novel Inquiries Within the Pharmaceutical Industry

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Introduction

Pharmaceutical companies often receive novel requests for medical information that have not been previously received, require evaluation of literature, preparation of a response, and follow-up with the inquirer. There is limited information on effective processes for handling novel inquiries and it is unknown what best practices currently exist.

Objectives

- Characterize how Medical Information departments within the pharmaceutical industry receive, research, and respond to novel inquiries.
- Identify if there are consistencies among Medical Information departments when handling novel inquiries.
- Determine what best practices exist for efficient handling of novel inquiries by pharmaceutical companies.

Methods

A total of 21 Medical Information departments within pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies were contacted to complete a survey through electronic mail. Proposed survey questions were pre-tested by Medical Information colleagues. The target population was selected by contacting current and previous Medical Information residents and fellows via email. The recipient of the survey was asked to complete the survey and also forward the email to other Medical Information colleagues. The participants were given 1 month to complete the survey. Companies that did not respond by the initial deadline were sent a follow-up email. Anonymity of respondents was upheld. Responses were then tabulated and the data was analyzed.

Survey components

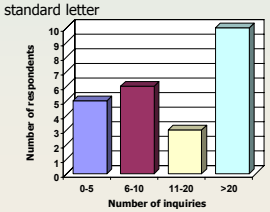
- The survey contained a brief introduction, clearly defined "novel inquiry" and stated the objectives.
- The 17-question survey was divided into 3 major components:
  - General questions
  - Novel inquiries for which an answer exists
  - Novel inquiries for which an answer does NOT exist

Results

- Twenty-four responses were received from 13 pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies.

General Questions

Figure 1. On a monthly basis, the number of questions that cannot be answered using a standard letter



- Outside of an internal database, 96% of respondents (23/24) stated that they use PubMed/Medline to research a novel inquiry. Other useful sources for research included EMBASE, the Internet (e.g. Google), International Pharmaceutical Abstracts, and Congress meetings and websites.
- When asked if research results of a novel inquiry are shared within the Medical Information Department, 58% (14/24) of respondents stated that they were. Those who responded yes described the following methods of sharing: departmental meetings, product database (e.g. Excel spreadsheet), file archive, and email correspondence.
- Sixty-three percent (15/24) of respondents stated that they have a tracking system to capture the *number* of novel inquires received and 71% (17/24) of respondents stated that they have a tracking system to capture the *types* of novel inquires received.

Figure 2. Tracking systems used to capture the subject matter of novel inquiries

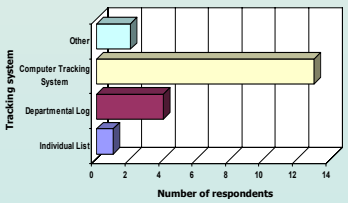
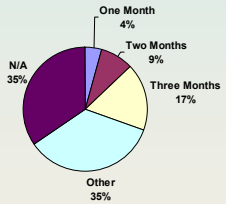


Figure 3. Amount of time before a novel inquiry that has not been researched is officially closed



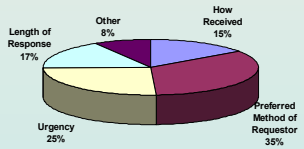
Of the 16 respondents (70%) who answered either "Other" or "N/A," the majority stated that all inquiries are researched and addressed prior to closure.

- Forty two percent of respondents (10/24) stated that other departmental responsibilities hinder their ability to research novel inquiries in a timely manner. Some of these responsibilities included promotion review activities, letter development, other projects and workstream initiatives, and medical conferences.

Novel Inquiries for Which an Answer Exists

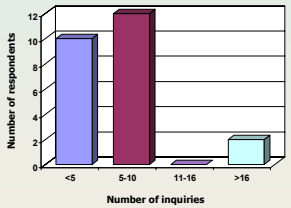
- Companies most often determine how to respond to novel inquiries based on the requestor's preference. There was no preferred method of responding to the inquiry (verbal or written response).

Figure 4. Factors used to determine whether a written or verbal response is provided for novel inquiries for which an answer exists



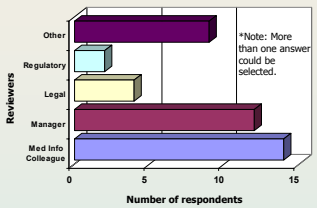
*Note: More than one answer could be selected.

Figure 5. Number of similar inquires needed to trigger the creation of a standard letter



- The average response turnaround time for novel inquiries that had been researched from the time it was received ranged from 24-48 hours (42%, 10/24) to 1-2 weeks (33%, 8/24).

Figure 6. Levels of review for draft novel inquiries



Novel Inquiries for Which an Answer Does NOT Exist

- One hundred percent (24/24) of respondents stated that there was follow up with the inquirer if a response was not found.
- Average response turnaround time from when the inquiry was received to when the answer was provided was less than 2 weeks for all companies, with equal distribution between <24 hours, 24-48 hours, and 1-2 weeks.
- There was no preferred method in responding to the inquiry (verbal or written response).

Discussion

This survey explored how novel inquiries are processed and responded to among various pharmaceutical companies. These results demonstrate that there is a wide range in the number of novel inquiries received by pharmaceutical companies. An efficient way of processing novel inquiries may be to share research results within departments by utilizing a shared database. This may help to eliminate duplicative work.

One of the goals of a Medical Information department is to provide accurate, well-balanced medical information in a timely manner to practitioners and patients. Seventy percent of respondents addressed all inquiries prior to closure and a response to a novel inquiry is usually provided within 2 weeks. Of the 13 respondents whose response turnaround time was less than 48 hours, half did not have a formal review process in place for novel inquiry responses. In addition, only 2 of these 13 respondents stated that other departmental responsibilities hindered their ability to respond to novel inquiries in a timely manner.

The majority of respondents create a new standard letter prior to receiving an inquiry for the tenth time. Approximately half of these respondents will create a standard letter prior to receiving an inquiry less than 5 times.

Limitations

The major limitation of our results is that only 13 pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies are represented. This may be partially due to legal restrictions imparted on employees to respond to external surveys.

Conclusions

- There is consistency in the way that novel inquiries are researched among the pharmaceutical companies surveyed.
- Approximately two-thirds of respondents have a tracking system in place for capturing the number and type of novel inquiries received.
- All of the companies surveyed follow up with the requestor within 2 weeks or less in the event that an answer did not exist.
- An opportunity for increased efficiency may be for Medical Information specialists to share their research results within their departments.

Acknowledgements

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