BECOMING BOARD CERTIFIED IN MEDICAL AFFAIRS (BCMAS):
THE NEW STANDARD IN PHARMA

Interviews with BCMAS Professionals

By Elio Evangelista

Anyone working in medical affairs understands that it's a highly specialized area. And often, medical affairs executives get so engrossed in their day to day activities that it's challenging to gain a deep understanding of how other departments and functions operate, let alone train another colleague on these functions. But as medical affairs’ strategic value continues to increase, executives need to be conversant about other vital aspects of the life sciences industry, such as pharmacovigilance, digital technology, or compliance and regulatory implications.

But comprehensive, accredited, educational programs for medical affairs professionals are few and far between. And there's certainly no programs offering board certification. The Accreditation Council for Medical Affairs' (ACMA), however, offers a Board Certified Medical Affairs Specialist (BCMAS) program for medical affairs professionals across the career spectrum. The BCMAS curriculum is comprehensive spanning 20 modules covering all areas of medical affairs. The BCMAS program is the most comprehensive educational program for medical affairs professionals and unlike other training programs that may be available; it is the only one that is accredited.

Structured Learning and a Deeper Understanding of Industry Functions

Beyond internal training within their companies, medical affairs executives simply don't have structured options for learning how the different functions within the life science industry interact with each other. The ACMA's goal is to establish a common language – a standard – that medical affairs executives can converse in. With a curriculum that includes best practices across the organization, the ACMA's aim is to reinforce an integrated, cross-functional approach to medical affairs that makes medical affairs to be viewed as a true partner by other departments. And this has proven to be valuable to many who are now board certified thanks to the ACMA.
"I can’t think of a better way, through a very tightly structured format, to learn a lot about field medical and medical affairs. I’m always in this mindset of learning more. The challenge to learn more about other areas of medical affairs without having to travel back to the home office and doing an internship was one of the reasons I opted to go through the program. And I thought a home-based, self-paced program would be great. What a nice and subtle way to differentiate yourself amongst other peer groups either within or across different companies.

"At some point, someone puts information in a whole new context and now it changes its meaning. And that’s what I saw in the ACMA’s 20 modules, with several subject areas that I am very familiar with and several that I am not. I really felt that I wanted to learn a whole lot more about the very broad topics. So I took it partly for self-improvement.

"I learned a lot more about regulatory affairs. We talk about REMs and we support REMs in medical affairs. But I learned a lot about REMs and safety and pharmacovigilance. There are certain elements of the program that really expanded my understanding.

"It seems like the 20 topics were very separate enough from each other that there was minimal redundancy. One of the best benefits is the byproduct. I’ve been in medical affairs since 2000, working alongside of regulatory, legal and drug info. I think what’s good about the BCMAS is it expands your horizons to see these other major areas and the roles and responsibilities within them. I think that’s a nice benefit from going through the certification process.

"I think that what helps me is just better understanding all of the nuts and bolts of the various areas that we work with in medical affairs. And it’s hard to have that appreciation without thoroughly diving into some of this content. So I think it just makes me more appreciative and gives me more context with the other departments and their roles and responsibilities.

"As we differentiate and look at different titles, then I think I will have a nice segue into other roles because of the board certification. I think it was a very good growth platform and a great way to differentiate yourself amongst peers where there isn’t a ton of latitude for growth. The people who go through this process and pass it, that’s a whole different level of commitment that they showed to the organization."

Robert F.
Senior Medical Science Liaison
Having a professional certification creates a uniform standard of competency and excellence for industry professionals who are responsible for providing critical information to doctors which impacts patient lives.
DIFFERENTIATION AMONG PEERS AND GRABBING RECRUITERS’ ATTENTION

Everyone approaches the board certification process for different reasons. Some are looking to add to their personal understanding of medical affairs’ role in the life sciences industry. Others seek to differentiate themselves from their peers. Still others are looking for a challenge to learn what they don't know. According to individuals who have gone through the curriculum and earned their BCMAS, the program meets all of those goals.

But the BCMAS program appeals to younger professionals for very concrete reasons. They feel that having the board certification attached to their names gives them a leg up in both hiring and career development. Anecdotally, BCMAS graduates have noticed more momentum in their recruiting activities. That's not their only reason for getting a BCMAS certification, however.

"I'm a recent PharmD graduate. So my current goal is to break into the pharmaceutical industry. With the BCMAS program, the main goal for me was to get more experience and make myself more competitive for fellowships and jobs and other career opportunities.

"There are a few forces at play that any other fourth year pharmacy student or PharmD graduate who's looking to break into the industry faces. In terms of pharmacy, if we're not at an over-supply of pharmacists yet, we're pretty much right there. So as a candidate, you're looking for something to differentiate yourself, something that's going to give you some sort of valuable experience that you can talk about in an interview.

"The ACMA was a very comprehensive curriculum. I now have better knowledge of some of the day-to-day activities and some of the more granular details; like the ins and outs of an advisory board, for example. It went into a lot of details for those medical affairs activities. That really was valuable and gave me a better understanding. I think it really made a big difference just in terms of response from recruiters and hiring managers.

"In my time since completing the curriculum, just my overall understanding of medical affairs has really increased. I've been getting a lot more traction in my job search opportunities. I think overall it does give me a lot more confidence in my job search. I really think the BCMAS helped me to tie together my story as a candidate. It demonstrates my commitment to medical affairs. Anyone interested in medical affairs or a medical information role, those individuals would be well served to take the BCMAS program.

"In my particular instance the certification made sense. I think there's definitely a big need for some sort of standardization or certification of medical affairs professionals. To me we're the extension of the healthcare professional in the pharmaceutical setting. We have a responsibility for patient care when making those decisions. If we have medical professionals in these roles who could affect tens of thousands of patients, if not more, I think we'd be doing ourselves a disservice if we didn't have some sort of certification or credentialing just to make sure that everyone is at a certain standard. The ACMA is a great organization and I really believe in their mission."

Bolu O. PhamD Graduate
"The BCMAS helped me to tie together my story as a candidate."

I came across the BCMAS through a few articles shared to me on LinkedIn. I’m relatively young in my industry career still and I thought it might be something to 1) set me apart from other candidates when I started applying and then 2) for my own learning purposes, just to learn a little bit more. Other programs are more specific to individual departments. And I wanted to learn a little bit across departments. The BCMAS offers that.

"I came into medical information right out of school. I felt I was lacking that global knowledge of the industry. So I thought that this type of course would be able to offset the fact that I didn’t do a fellowship. It shows that I’m still dedicated and at this point I’m very interested in having an industry career for life. It might put me on more of a level playing field with someone who had completed a fellowship.

"When I had initiated the program, I had started a new job within the last six months. I wasn’t looking to get a new job at that point. But I thought the knowledge would be helpful and I thought that, at some point, when I am ready to go to a new position, that would be attractive to go on my CV.

"I also liked that it had a proctored exam at the end. And it had the ability to have that certification that you could share, that you could have those letters after your name. I think that it just added another layer to not just having completed modules but having shown that you learned something, that you were able to pass this accredited exam, I think it gives you another leg up. The testing portion really motivates the individual to know the material and be able to speak to it. Not only is it beneficial for you because it forces you to know everything, but then it’s also that test to make sure you did learn what you needed to know.

"I found the most value in those modules that were outside of what I do on a daily basis. I definitely think it was a good fit. I would recommend it and encourage people who were new or trying to break into industry to do it. The BCMAS was a great fundamental knowledge about a lot of departments and basic responsibilities. Before going through the certification process, I could function well. But now I have that background understanding to really make me understand what I’m doing, why I’m doing it and how it fits into the whole drug development process."

Chelsea A.
Senior Medical Information
DEMONSTRATE A COMMITMENT TO MEDICAL AFFAIRS

More important than setting themselves apart from other job seekers or attaching the BCMAS letters to the ends of their names, graduates of the ACMA’s program want to demonstrate their commitment to medical affairs. That’s becoming more difficult to do as medical affairs becomes increasingly strategic, increasingly larger as a function within the industry and increasingly competitive. Career-minded medical affairs professionals want to show senior leaders that their role is not just a job for them. They want to exhibit their dedication to the task with something tangible.

"Originally, I didn’t feel the need to be certified. My company offers a significant amount of training internally. But if you’re a physician, you can have the MD and there’s usually a board certification that comes along with it. If you’re a PharmD, there could be a board certification there as well. But I have a PhD. For PhDs, at least within medical affairs, I didn’t really see anything that would set me apart or demonstrate that I was in medical affairs for the long haul.

"I wanted to demonstrate not only to the leadership on my team, but also above them, that I was invested in being an MSL within medical affairs. From my perspective, it was certainly about the training and able to distinguish myself from others. But also, to help demonstrate to leaders that I’m invested in this role and my goal is to get better.

"I came from academia. In academia, it’s completely different from industry. I knew some about the industry. But there was a lot I didn’t know. And it seemed that the program would help me get up to speed faster than doing research on my own. I was hoping to get familiar with all aspects beyond medical affairs. There are so many people we work with internally. The BCMAS program helped to clarify for me what they’re doing, why they’re important and how we would make use of them from a medical affairs perspective. So it helped me understand where medical affairs sat within the bigger company. Ultimately, that’s one of the reasons why I did it, to help orient myself.

"We have 100 MSLs. Not one of them has the BCMAS certification. I thought this would be a great way to distinguish myself. I suspect that as the sizes of these groups grow larger, there might be a higher bar to make sure that people know and are informed on the important aspects of the role. I think that’s where the BCMAS may come in.

"For me, the driving force behind getting the certification was to help distinguish myself and learn about other roles. That way I could do my job more effectively in medical affairs. Now, I feel I’m a bit more competent as an MSL having an enhanced understanding of the roles and responsibilities of medical affairs as a whole. And I think it helps to set me apart from other MSLs within the company. In my personal opinion, it’s helping me be more valuable not only to the company, but also these physicians that I meet with and, ultimately, the patients."

Kelly K.
Senior Medical Science Liaison
Medical affairs departments throughout the industry have thousands of executives with medical or pharmacy doctorate degrees, along with their associated credentials. But the BCMAS credential has a unique appeal for medical affairs executives, many of whom don’t have a formal medical doctorate. And those with pharmacy doctorates sometimes feel that while a PharmD credential shows off one’s scientific research chops, it’s not specific enough to medical affairs to demonstrate the industry knowledge necessary or the ability to excel within a pharmaceutical or medical device company.

Those are some of the reasons why executives with more than a decade of industry experience have turned to the ACMA to earn their medical affairs credentials. And some of the more seasoned industry veterans have found so much value in the BCMAS program, that they’re championing it within their companies. As more medical affairs executives undergo the certification program, they’re seeing the value in it and recommending it to their peers.
"I was looking for more resources to just expand my own knowledge base and understand what additional information was out there related to this field. I saw the ACMA’s web site and that’s how I initially engaged. I think the ability to obtain a credential in this space that’s based on a level of knowledge of key elements seemed important to me.

"The fact that there was a basic curriculum that established a basic level of knowledge for all of these areas definitely made my approach more comprehensive. It made me a more well-rounded practitioner in what I do on a daily basis. There are reference materials that you can continue to access through the web site after you’re done. I have done that for sure, maybe for specific areas that I don’t see every day.

"My company has made this available to team members in our medical affairs group to also undergo certification. And several members of the team have actually done that. So this is now, in our company, second generation. We found it useful for the entire group. Without a huge number of additional options in this area, I think this really does serve an important role.

For our company, getting everyone on the same page through the curriculum gives everyone a common starting point, a common language about how all of this is discussed. Because sometimes people in medical affairs come from various backgrounds, I think it is worthwhile for a company. It’s something that my area has found important to support our team members in their own professional development to get this credential.

"It serves a relatively unique function. There aren’t all that many knowledge resources in medical affairs. The fact that you can pursue this and go through, get this information and then receive certification based on that, I just think it’s a really important resource. It’s relatively unique in this field. It’s certainly something that, for my group, we ended up providing and urging people to do. And I absolutely would say the same for anyone who’s in the field who’s looking to expand their knowledge base in this area. Anyone in the field of medical affairs would benefit from it."

Brian D.
Vice President of Medical Affairs

CONCLUSION

The Accreditation Council for Medical Affairs is meeting the daily challenge of expanding and level-setting the knowledge base of medical affairs professionals throughout the industry. The Board Certified Medical Affairs Specialist is quickly becoming the industry standard for medical affairs professionals to attain.

In its nearly four years, the ACMA has laid many in-roads into the industry and continues to do so. But the trend has unmistakably been a steady increase in moving the BCMAS toward the industry standard. With increased scrutiny on pharmaceutical industry practices, ensuring that pharmaceutical companies are validating the knowledge of their field teams in medical affairs and sales is imperative. More and more medical affairs professionals sign up to undergo the certification process each month. And as that trend continues, medical affairs professionals throughout the life sciences industry will no doubt be better prepared, more confident and, most importantly, more knowledgeable as they approach their roles.