



Could I become a physician in the pharmaceutical industry?: practical insights from a 12-year veteran in pharma

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Fig. 1. Author's photo.

It was 10 a.m. on a Monday this September, and I was preparing a training session aimed at boosting my team's confidence in publishing academic papers. By a happy coincidence, the guest lecturer for our session was the Editor-in-Chief of the *Ewha Medical Journal*, representing my beloved alma mater, Ewha. Following a wonderful session and a lively discussion, the lecturer assigned me a small task: as a physician working at a pharmaceutical company rather than in a hospital, could I write an essay to assist those considering various career paths in medicine? Twelve years earlier, I had left a position in the Department of Family Medicine at a university hospital to embark on a career in the pharmaceutical industry. The experiences shared by senior colleagues at that time gave me courage, and now I hope that sharing my own story will help guide those who follow (Fig. 1).

Medical affairs and the role of physicians in pharma

In Korea, the role of medical affairs in a pharmaceutical company and the responsibilities of a pharmaceutical physician are defined in the *Pharmaceutical Medicine* [1]. The Korean Society of Pharmaceutical Medicine characterizes pharmaceutical medicine as a discipline focused on the medical facets of drug research, development, evaluation, registration, post-marketing surveillance, and medico-marketing. Professionals in this field are referred to as pharmaceutical physicians. The book provides an overview of the history and framework of medical affairs through the lens of pharmaceutical physicians. Chapter 2, "Pharmaceutical Physicians," features Dr. Byung-Hoon Jeon, a specialist in obstetrics and gynecology, who held the position of Medical Director at Pfizer Korea in 1961 and later at GSK Korea until 2001. The text indicates that a medical affairs structure similar to that of U.S. companies has been present in global pharmaceutical companies in Korea since the 1960s.

The medical affairs department typically operates under the leadership of a Medical Director or Head of Medical Affairs. This department generally comprises physicians, pharmacists, nurses,

and life sciences experts who hold graduate-level degrees. The structure of the department may vary based on the size of the company, its key products, and the stages of its product life cycles. Standard components of the department include a medical information team and a medical franchise team. In some instances, the team may also encompass clinical operations, pharmacovigilance, regulatory affairs, or patient support functions.

The medical franchise team is tasked with medico-marketing responsibilities. This team comprises roles such as Medical Advisors, Medical Managers, and Medical Scientific Liaisons (MSLs), each specializing in a particular product and disease area. Typically, the team includes physicians, with positions generally available within this group. Their duties involve developing late-phase (Phase 3 and 4) clinical trials, engaging with healthcare professionals, and relaying insights from these professionals to internal stakeholders, including regulatory affairs, market access, and marketing. Additionally, they provide medical advice concerning drug reimbursement and marketing activities and are actively involved in communications with health authorities.

What have I done at pharmaceutical companies?

I was part of the 1997 cohort at Ewha Medical School. After completing my residency in the Family Medicine Department at Ewha Mokdong Hospital, I served as an assistant professor at CHA Bundang Medical Center. In 2012, I joined my first global pharmaceutical company. Since then, I have worked at four other global company, making this my fifth.

My initial position was as Senior Medical Manager, a role typically reserved for more senior employees; however, my hospital experience was deemed valuable. In this capacity, I served as a medical consultant, focusing on the therapeutic indications of a botulinum toxin product. I was solely responsible for managing this product area. My duties included devising medical strategies to secure regulatory approval for new indications and reimbursement, organizing advisory board meetings with key experts, and training first-time injectors. This role provided me with significant insights into medical affairs and the nuances of functioning effectively within a corporate environment.

I served as a Medical Advisor at my second company, leading the medical team for ophthalmology product. During my tenure, I had the valuable opportunity to be involved in the launch of a new product, working closely with the marketing, regulatory affairs, and market access teams. Thanks to our successful collaborations, the product achieved strong market performance. This role strengthened my skills in conducting advisory board meetings, supporting investigator-initiated trials, and organizing impactful symposia featuring renowned international speakers. As the team expanded from one to three members, I was promoted to Senior Medical Advisor, I worked at this company 5 years and had the valuable experience of growing my role, responsibilities, and maturity alongside the new product launch.

From my third company onward, I transitioned into managerial roles, overseeing multiple teams as a middle manager and a medical director. It was a period of two and a half years, during which I learned the role of a manager, leading multiple teams, mediating conflicts between them, and achieving the organization's goals.

I currently hold an executive position since my fourth company, where I contribute to the overall scientific strategic direction of company. This career progression, often referred to as the 'managerial track,' is a typical path for pharmaceutical physicians who aim to combine their expertise with leadership skills. Such skills are essential for managing specialized departments like medical affairs.

Career paths in the pharmaceutical industry are notably diverse. Similar to how a first-year resident progresses to a second-year, career advancement is not always linear or obligatory. Many professionals find fulfillment working in smaller teams or as individual contributors, without pursuing traditional management roles. Others choose to deepen their expertise in a specific therapeutic area, serving as advisors and strategists for global clinical trials. For instance, some may specialize as medical advisors in anti-cancer drugs, launching new products and conducting local research in this niche. These individuals pursue an 'expert track,' focusing on developing profound knowledge and experience in a particular area. Ultimately, there is no universally correct path; pharmaceutical physicians evolve through diverse experiences and opportunities.

What competencies do pharmaceutical physicians need?

Much has been discussed about the essential skills required for working in medical affairs, with numerous studies and surveys emphasizing these competencies [2–5]. The most crucial skills include medical expertise, the ability to rapidly absorb new information, and strong communication abilities. The latter is particularly important for translating complex medical content into practical insights that can be understood by both internal teams and external customers, primarily healthcare professionals. Additionally, a patient centered approach and high ethical standards are fundamental to medical affairs.

Most physicians inherently possess basic competencies such as medical expertise and patient-centered mindset. Additionally, if you have consistently shown the ability to listen carefully to patients and communicate effectively with various hospital staff, patients, and students, you will have ample examples to highlight these competencies. However, two additional skills that are particularly vital for physicians in pharmaceutical roles, yet less frequently discussed, are flexibility of thought and leadership.

Unlike hospitals, where a physician's role is central and supported by other professionals, the corporate environment necessitates collaboration among individuals from diverse backgrounds, working as equals to achieve business goals. A flexible mindset is crucial for adapting to a company setting, as it fosters understanding and respect for different viewpoints and approaches. Moreover, leveraging expertise to develop mutually satisfying solutions significantly enhances one's value within a corporate context.

Leadership is crucial, even without formal authority. It forms the bedrock of company culture through successful collaboration and teamwork. Leadership involves not only guiding a team but also motivating others, setting goals, and solving problems. For physicians, this often entails a balance between their extensive medical knowledge and the soft skills necessary to influence and inspire others. Consider a past project where you collaborated with a diverse group of stakeholders—senior professors, younger residents, nurses, and administrators. How did you lead, and what feedback did you receive from your collaborators? Reflecting on these experiences can help identify emerging leadership qualities that could be beneficial in a corporate setting.

Why did I choose a pharmaceutical career?

One day, I asked myself why I chose a professional career. My conclusion was that I sought to challenge myself in a broader context. As a physician, I was committed to caring for patients and contributing to a healthier society, but I also wanted to broaden my horizons. To any junior

colleagues contemplating a career shift, whether for reasons similar to mine or different, I hope my journey encourages you to seize the vast opportunities that lie ahead.

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Authors' contributions

All work was done by Yoenjung Lee.

Conflict of interest

Yoenjung Lee is an employee of Takeda Pharmaceuticals Korea Co., Ltd. This article does not promote or advertise the company; instead, it provides an introduction for medical students and junior doctors who are interested in the role of physicians in the pharmaceutical industry. Otherwise, no potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

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