

INSIDE CHINA: What's up, doc? How Chinese KOLs can help your China access strategy



Michael Alper of NeuvoMedica discusses how getting the perspectives of Chinese physicians and key opinion leaders can be invaluable in deepening your understanding of the China medtech market

Academic conferences are great tools for physicians to improve their knowledge and skills by interacting with other members of their specialty. They are also great places for manufacturers to exhibit and teach physicians about their latest and greatest technologies.

In China, top physicians are often sponsored by foreign manufacturers to attend international conferences for educational purposes with the hope that it will improve relationships with these Chinese physicians and in turn eventually lead to sales. Unlike the US, the Chinese government allows this and even encourages this behavior as it realizes the educational and networking value that Chinese physicians get by attending these conferences.

Recently, I had the opportunity to attend the annual meeting of the US-based Society for Vascular Surgery (SVS) in Boston. This is one of the top international conferences for vascular surgeons, covering over a four-day period the most important topics in vascular surgery including subjects related to carotid, aorta, endovascular techniques; hemodialysis access; ethics and many others. There were approximately 30 physicians from China in attendance. Among them were a number of top national key opinion leaders, including Guo Wei, head of vascular surgery at China's 301 PLA Military Hospital, who was invited to speak at the International Symposium of the conference.

When I asked some of the attending Chinese physicians their impressions of the SVS meeting, including what areas were of most value and what areas were not so fitting for the Chinese environment, some interesting differences between China and the West came to surface.

Data not so big in China

One of the major topics of discussion at this year's SVS was the use of

big data to support research efforts. Due to pricing pressures, outcomes-based reimbursement schemes and other factors, big data has been a huge trend in the West. There were many presentations by international physicians whose conclusions were based on mined outcomes data.

However, China is significantly behind in this respect and there is expected to be some pushback on implementing such sort of outcomes database. One reason is that the hospitals tend to be more independent of each other and not so willing to share data. Another reason is that physicians in China are more fearful of negative outcomes data being made public. Not only are they afraid of losing potential patients, physicians are also fearful of potential violence carried out against them by the patient themselves or their families if a treatment outcome is not ideal. There have been cases of physicians being attacked or even killed by disgruntled patients.

This is another reason that the international conferences are so important. Not only are Chinese physicians looking for new technologies to improve outcomes in China, but they are also looking to the international community for supportive data to help them choose the best options among existing therapies.

Knowing China KOLs, knowing China market

During this conference, I had the opportunity to take a few of the Chinese physicians around to visit several of the exhibitor booths to hear their thoughts on new products and technologies not yet in China. Overall, the Chinese physicians were very excited and positive about most of the technologies I introduced to them. From thrombectomy, atherectomy, new stent graft systems for abdominal aortic aneurysms, robotic surgery, and many

other areas, the physicians saw a clear need in their centers. There were some concerns about cost and economics as a major barrier, but as China's economy continues to strengthen, this seems to be less of a concern than before. Some products were seen as not being sufficiently differentiated from what already exists in China and there were concerns about these products' potential success.

One of the booths that I took a Chinese KOL to had a new type of catheter. Interestingly enough, the KOL had independently thought of a similar product several years ago and filed for a patent in China. However the KOL's design had a slightly different shape. I was witness to an interesting discussion between the KOL and the company's head of R&D on the optimal shape for this product. My take away from this incident was that with increased international exposure, top Chinese physicians are coming up with their own ideas and innovations and could be good resources both for local Chinese manufacturers as well as foreign or multinational manufacturers to utilize in developing new products.

For small and medium-sized companies, sending Chinese physicians to international conferences oftentimes would not make economic sense. However, if approached correctly these conferences can be leveraged to reach out to Chinese physicians in order to understand better their perspectives on your products and the market situation as well as help develop the relationships with the KOLs for eventual entry into the China market.

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