The opportunity to attend the first ever Medical Science Liaison Society’s Candidate Career Conference was phenomenal. Although I brought a healthy dose of skepticism, I was really impressed. The PhD life can be hectic and it’s hard to set aside time to learn about different career paths when there’s so many papers to read and experiments to do. So before I headed off to the conference, I did almost nothing to prepare. I looked up MSL on Wikipedia and perused the MSL Society website. I purchased business cards through Cornell, but only because the conference organizers had sent us all emails saying that we should definitely bring some.

Although I regret not looking a little deeper into what the MSL role was, the conference was perfect for a newcomer like myself. The MSL Society members were easy to talk to and incredibly informative and supportive. They were willing to answer all questions and to demystify the recruitment and hiring process. The event was a nice size of around 80 attendees, so it was easy to network and meet almost everyone (including the organizers, speakers, and recruiters). Most of the other attendees I met were current PhD candidates, postdocs, and people later in their careers looking for a change (i.e. professors, MDs, PharmDs, and retirees). After the conference, I made dozens of new LinkedIn connections from all over the US.

The MSL job title comes in different flavors – scientific affairs manager, medical liaisons, medical scientists, and medical science managers. The main role of the MSL is to build and maintain relationships with outside experts called key opinion leaders (KOLs). MSLs use a lot of abbreviations – they passed around handouts with the abbreviations and it was pages thick!

The MSL role can involve traveling (up to 75% of the time) and talking to people (you must have good interpersonal and soft skills). A question that kept coming up was how MSLs are different from pharmaceutical sales reps. A sales rep will focus the product they’re trying to sell and usually only talk to doctors for a couple of minutes. On the other hand, MSLs serve as scientific experts, typically focused on one area of expertise, which is based on prior experience (i.e. previous research, career, or post-doc experience). MSLs serve as scientific peers and resources by communicating with people like physicians, clinicians, and researchers to make sure that the company’s products are being used effectively and in the relevant patient population. A lot of time is spent reading papers, understanding the science, and educating others.

Most MSL openings are looking to hire you in 6-8 weeks, so you have to be ready to start. Also, you must have the PhD degree, companies usually won’t interview you without it. Interviews typically require a 20-30 minute talk and if hired you may go through about 6 months of training. Most MSL career opportunities are centered around big cities and near airports. Houston and Boston were mentioned a number of times. If you’re interested, the MSL Society provides a number of helpful training workshops to prepare people for interviews. Also, as part of the conference fee, we all received 1 year membership to the MSL Society and a copy of the MSL book by Dr. Samuel Jacob Dyer, who’s also the CEO and Chairman of the MSL Society. He was candid and made everyone was on the same page. The MSL Society is a nonprofit organization and all the organizers who attended volunteered their own time.
I only had a very vague understanding of the role of medical science liaison (MSL) before this MSL trainee conference hosted by the MSL society. It was very generous for the BEST program to sponsor our attendances at this conference. I definitely had a much better understanding of the MSL world than I did before. Like the job title suggested, this position serves as a liaison between the medical world (physicians) and the science behind the pharmaceutical products. This job requires a doctoral degree in order to better understand and convey the scientific evidences to the physicians. It’s a very different position than the sales department. As a MSL, you main job is not to sell/market, but to layout the science in front of the physicians and help them gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the products. I think this is the perfect job for someone who loves communicating science, enjoys networking and traveling.

However, becoming a MSL is a career path that requires extensive amount of post-doctoral experiences. This is more a later career path. But as a Ph.D. student, we can start preparing ourselves right now by attending MSL society training classes and/or conference to network and focus our job search on industrial positions to learn the skills we need for future MSL role. MSL world is a very competitive and small world, so networking is the key to break in. Pay attention to details in life and try to come up with a good story to impress the recruiters/MSL managers will be really helpful. That being said, MSL is a well-respected, financially well-supported yet not well-known career. If you can start preparing early, you are already ahead of a lot of competitors.
MSL Society Meetings
by Jocelyn Marshall

2015 Annual Meeting
2016 Candidate Meeting
What is the MSL Society?

• First professional society for medical science liaisons
• Hold conferences, trainings, webinars, etc. on best practices for MSLs as well as conduct research on MSL salary, job satisfaction, training, etc.
• Have private LinkedIn network as well as job board
What is an MSL?

• Medical Science Liaisons are hired by pharma/biotech companies to represent 1+ drugs/devices in their portfolio/pipeline
• Drugs are generally new to market or in late stage trials
• The main job of the MSL is to build relationships with Key Opinion Leaders (KOL; doctors, researchers) in certain territory and keep them up to date on the latest research regarding the drugs. They also can then recruit these KOL to serve on boards/committees, present at conferences, perform company sponsored research, etc.
MSLS Conferences

• I was lucky enough to attend two of the MSLS conferences with the help of the BEST Program

• MSLS Candidate Conference (Atlanta, GA)
  – Great conference if you are just learning about the position or preparing to start applying for MSL positions
  – Presentations by current MSLs as well as MSL hiring managers on what they are looking for in a candidate
  – Lots of networking opportunities

• MSLS Annual Conference (Boston, MA)
  – At this conference you will learn about more in depth details of the MSL position.
  – Mainly attended by current MSLs, MSL managers, etc.
  – Amazing networking opportunity
How do I see the MSLS helping me?

• I will be applying for an MSL position this fall
• The main advantage for me getting involved in the MSL Society is the contacts I have gained from my experiences
• Also, I now know the terminology and can speak the language during interviews which is key when you are interviewing against other candidates with 3-5+ years of experience