



HEALTH + WELL-BEING | Meeting Recap

What CHROs Should Know From M1's Inaugural Chief Medical Officers Meeting



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Frustration in the lack of AI tools for back-office occupational health needs. An ongoing struggle with how employers address mental health. The challenge of developing health metrics to quantify their work for the business.

These issues and more dominated the conversation at M1's inaugural meeting of chief medical and chief health officers in London in mid-July. Hosted by Unilever's Chief Health and Well-Being Officer, Diana Han, M.D., our first gathering of 12 physician executives included participants from consumer, industrial, pharmaceutical, and other global firms who discussed critical issues across a broad range of topics that impact the health, well-being, and performance of employees worldwide.

Despite the diverse range of organizations in attendance, the priorities, challenges, and goals of the group were remarkably aligned, with valuable lessons for companies worldwide. Below, we share key insights from the meeting that CHROs should know—as always, please let us know if we can connect you with anyone for more information.

There's a Critical Need to Define the Role of the Chief Medical Officer

Only about half of large companies have a CMO. That means defining the scope of the role, its areas of focus, and key performance indicators is essential both for newly-created positions and for justifying the expansion of responsibilities in longstanding roles.

Many companies have invested heavily in employee health and wellness, benefits, occupational medicine, and health-related recruitment and retention. However, these have often been uncoordinated and suffered from a lack of employee trust in their motives, construction, and execution. At times, CMOs expressed the

AT A GLANCE:

- Only about half of all large companies have a chief medical or chief health officer. It's essential for those with newly created positions—or for those justifying the expansion of their responsibilities—to make sure their role is well-defined with key performance indicators.
- CMOs are frustrated by the applicability of AI for their work, with not enough focused on back-end needs.
- One of the most effective ways to gain executive understanding and buy-in on mental health is to more closely link it to safety, where there's already support.

challenges of being moved between reporting lines (such as between HR and safety) and the impact of that on what gets prioritized. “That’s been an issue for many of us. We all report to different people at different stages in our career,” one participant said.

Another said it’s been really hard to balance issues like health promotion and prevention between human resources and safety teams. “Quite often HR [teams] are like well, that’s an operational line problem. You report to safety.” Finding ways to effectively build an integrated approach will be essential for driving value and engendering trust.

Health Promotion Must Be Directly Connected to Corporate Performance

Historically, the success of health promotion has been loosely tied to lowering healthcare costs, improving employee health, and strengthening recruitment and retention. Programs are often seen as fundamentally justifiable or simply expected by employees.

However, outcomes are often poorly tracked, if at all. As a result, these programs, which are often lacking clear value propositions, can be early targets of cost-cutting measures, especially in times of financial pressure. As a metric, “engagement is not enough, safety is not enough,” said one participant. “Are we genuinely showing something [that can be] quantified in hard numbers?”

Successful CMOs define return on investment by focusing on the impact of programs on factors that directly impact corporate performance, such as absenteeism, safety, and team effectiveness. One CMO mentioned how much her board appreciates the analysis of their data being outsourced to a local university, offering “arm’s-length” objectivity; others have piloted interventions compared to control groups to demonstrate ROI prior to broader implementation.

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- a participant in the inaugural M1 gathering of chief medical officers and chief health officers

Employers Need to Treat Mental Health as a Safety Issue

Employers are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of mental health in the workplace. However, many struggle with how to best address it. This is compounded when they confuse mental health with well-being and lump programs focused on it in with general wellness. “They separate out mental health as

something a bit esoteric and they're not really sure what to do with it," one CMO said.

One of the most effective ways to gain executive understanding and buy-in, CMOs said, is to focus on safety, an area they know well and that's often engrained in the company culture. "Linking mental health to safety, which links to performance, is very much where we're trying to get the organization," said one participant.

Safety is a common concern among large organizations, where the risks and potential impacts are clearly defined. Connecting it puts mental health into a category and framework leadership understands and is already committed to addressing.

CMOs Are Frustrated with Applicable AI

Despite the rapid proliferation of AI, deployment of health-related tools is following a characteristically more cautious approach. While their colleagues in HR have quickly rolled out effective AI tools that cut costs, headcount, and productivity, CMOs said the marketplace has been too focused on AI solutions like virtual clinicians rather than tools that fit their back-end needs with appropriate privacy and security measures.

For many applications and agents, capabilities are limited while regulatory barriers and privacy concerns have slowed adoption. "They're not focused on the back-end stuff and generating data," one participant said. "They're trying to do the sexy, fun things which is not robust."

However, certain point solutions, such as ergonomic assessments, chemical exposure trends, and mental health coaching, have shown real benefits, participants said. There was some concern that tacking on multiple solutions or vendors is leading to greater IT ecosystem complexity, but some of this may be necessary to segregate protected sensitive medical information and engender employee trust.

Bringing CMOs into decision-making is essential. "Nature fills a vacuum," said one participant. "If we the experts don't start telling the companies the use-case scenarios, our digital HR colleagues are off doing it without us." As they rush to adopt AI, leadership teams need to keep in mind the unique challenges of health-related employee data and prioritize enhanced abilities to assess AI tools, maintain human oversight, and protect data privacy.

CMOs Face a Data Analytics and Collection Challenge

A common theme throughout the discussions was that no matter how sophisticated the analytical tools may be, the quality of the analysis is dependent on the availability and accuracy of data. "We need to make it more structured, we need to make it more data-driven," said one participant of their work.

Some regulatory efforts, such as the European Sustainability Reporting Standards (ESRS), encourage reliable data collection and reporting. Meanwhile, restrictions on data access and use, such as GDPR and health-specific regulations, result in data gaps, inconsistencies, and limitations on analytical power.

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