

CONVERSATIONS

An Interview with Lisa McDonald, Metagenics Senior Director of Marketing and Medical Education

Interview by Sheldon Baker

Lisa McDonald, boasting over two decades of invaluable experience in the nutritional industry, currently serves as the senior director of marketing and medical education at Metagenics. As a visionary leader, Ms. McDonald has played a pivotal role in shaping Metagenics' strategic initiatives. Her dedication to advancing medical education ensures practitioners stay abreast of industry advancements, firmly establishing Metagenics as a leader in cutting-edge healthcare solutions. Her passion lies in steering towards a future where personalized nutritional intervention becomes the standard in promoting optimal health. (Altern Ther Health Med. 2024;30(1):94-96).

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Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine (ATHM): For those who may not be familiar with your company please provide a short overview of Metagenics.

Lisa McDonald: When I think about Metagenics, it's really a leading health and wellness company specializing in nutritional supplements. I also think that we are really focused on lifestyle medicine and personalized wellness solutions. We have been renowned for our scientific research and evidence-based nutrition. We have a whole range of dietary supplements and medical foods as well as products designed to support various categories of health, including but not limited to immune, cardiovascular, and gastrointestinal health.

Founded in 1983, our corporate headquarters are in Aliso Viejo, Calif. Our products are most commonly used by healthcare practitioners to complement their patient treatment plans so it can be used to enhance whatever protocols they might have a patient on or used as preventive medicine to help people stay healthier longer. I think one of our strengths is the emphasis we place on education and training. We provide healthcare practitioners with educational resources and have an entire website dedicated to research that we call the Metagenics Institute (www.metagenicsinstitute.com). We have professional development opportunities as well. It's our mission, and has always been, to help people lead happier, healthier lives, and to empower practitioners, as well as their patients, the end users of our products, to have the best choice of nutrition through supplements and products they can trust and enhance their lifestyle with.

ATHM: Can consumers buy direct from Metagenics?

Ms. McDonald: Yes. Within the past year we have embarked on a digital brand awareness campaign. We think that Metagenics is one of the best kept secrets in the health industry and feel it's important that more consumers and more healthcare practitioners become familiar with our brand. Although we believe that the products are best used under the care of a healthcare professional, we recognize that savvy consumers want more access when it comes to choices regarding their health. Having an open website also creates a better user experience for anyone interacting with our ads. Still, throughout our website we encourage consumers to connect with practitioners using our brand to better understand our line and how to choose the best products for their personal health needs.

ATHM: Forty years ago, when Metagenics was born, a scientific concept called genetic potential through nutrition was introduced. Today, it's known as nutrigenomics and serves to address the patient's individual health needs for a higher level of personalized lifetime wellness care. Such a concept made and still makes Metagenics unique.

Ms. McDonald: Yes, we think so. Our founding Metagenics members embarked on this ambitious goal, that you did not have to be defined by your genes. Today, we know so much more about that. We understand epigenetic expressions. The time that Metagenics came out with that phrase, the whole human genome hadn't even been mapped yet. And so yes, we think it's very important. We have absolutely seen testimonials from both practitioners and patients over that 40-plus period of time that when you take a high-quality nutritional supplement, and couple that with a lifestyle modification program, you can get fantastic results. Your genes will then express themselves and you can get quite amazing clinical results which any practitioner who works with us knows and sees regularly in their clinical practice.

ATHM: It seems like Metagenics has grown very rapidly, especially in recent years.

Ms. McDonald: First of all, thank you for acknowledging our continued growth. We think we can continue to do this by strengthening our partnerships with healthcare practitioners. Whatever type of medicine you want to call it, holistic, integrative, or functional medicine, there used to be such a great divide between what is considered conventional medicine. But Metagenics feels these areas are coming together.

A very highly educated patient or consumer is seeking ways to enhance their health. One of the ways that we believe we can continue to grow is to drive brand awareness not only about Metagenics, but about personalized medicine. We are now doing that through a digital consumer campaign, as well as a targeted digital campaign to reach more conventional practitioners. In September, we launched our *science that creates balance* advertisements on digital platforms unique to practitioners, such as a platform called Sermo. Our goal is to continue to educate and drive awareness to help practitioners understand our brand is very different than typical brands they might interact with, and that we do much more due diligence than available over counter options. We were founded to make sure we create highly efficacious products a doctor could use with their patients and that our products would in no way harm or cause their own medical license to be revoked because what is on the label of our supplements is in the product.

At the time Metagenics was founded, there was a lot less regulation than there is today in the supplement industry. But Metagenics has always stayed ahead of whatever the industry requirements are. We believe we can help practitioners better understand the science of supplements and offer real solutions for their patients. Our ultimate goal is to help both consumers and practitioners to have trust in the Metagenics brand based on our 40-year history of creating superior products that work.

ATHM: Of course, a lot of doctors have a good handle on supplements.

Ms. McDonald: When I was reading an *InnoVision* interview you recently conducted with a cardiologist, I noticed how much we agreed about integrative medicine, but knowing we have got to work to bring these worlds of integrative and conventional medicine together in some ways, like Metagenics originally set out to do. Metagenics was one of the original founders of the Institute for Functional Medicine (IFM). Back in the day, Metagenics and the IMF were pretty much the same group, but our goal was always to make it a not for profit, and for it to become independent as it is today. When you get to the heart of what we're trying to do, it's to help identify what is causing health dysfunction and how do you best treat a patient. We feel we can play a very integral role with that.

ATHM: I realize you personally cover North America. But what role to you feel Metagenics will have globally with personalized medicine?

Ms. McDonald: We are absolutely aware the world is becoming more connected in this day and age. We have worked over the past two years to restructure ourselves into a worldwide formation where we have a global marketing team as well as local marketing teams. We have headquarters in the US as well as Belgium and Australia. Our global marketing team is comprised of members across those regions that are looking for opportunities for us to make headway into emerging global markets. And that is for everything from market strategies launching new products and how we can get the best of all things into those various markets. We're very forward thinking in that way and look towards how we can best appeal to different markets, and make sure that Metagenics not only has a presence in those countries but can help the end users of our products.

ATHM: Just how does Metagenics practitioner education programs work and how does a health professional get involved?

Ms. McDonald: We do our best to help support health professionals. It's quite easy for a practitioner to partner with us. First, we would have them open a healthcare professional account. They can do that through our website, or they can contact their representative. It's a straightforward process where we verify practitioner credentials. Once that account has been opened, they start to have access to our educational resources on our website. They also will have access to a practitioner portal where we house lectures. We have a program called MAPS which is Metagenics Advanced Practitioner Services, and we have a wide range of integrative practitioners giving anywhere from two- to 30-minute Ted-type talks that discuss a number of health topics as well as treating those in practice. The other great thing that Metagenics has that a lot of people sometimes don't know about is a clinical support team. We have clinicians available to answer questions by phone, including discussing complex cases with practitioners, helping them to make the best selection for their patient. We have both an inside and an outside sales force that we train deeply and intensely on product information and resources, as well as a full customer service team. Here again, we have our entire website Metagenics Institute which is full of information on various nutritional ingredients including a section called nutrition master's courses. For example, you choose a topic such as metabolic detoxification, and you can go through a comprehensive Power Point presentation of science, recent studies, statistics, and articles to familiarize yourself with that topic.

On top of all that information we have webinars we host, as well as webinars we co-sponsor with different industry partners. For instance, in the month of November we scheduled a webinar with the Personalized Lifestyle Medicine Institute, which is Jeff Bland's current, not for profit organization where we discussed the topic of Akkermansia and gut health as well as its effect on blood sugar. That is an example of a co-sponsored free webinar that we'll be having and hosting. Many of our programs offer CEUs which apply to naturopathic doctors, chiropractors, nurses, and nurse practitioners. We know the importance of continuing education for our practitioners, and we want to be a partner in their education journey. We do not offer CMEs at this time.

ATHM: Metagenics used to offer the FirstLine Therapy certification program. What is the status of that?

Ms. McDonald: FirstLine Therapy (FLT) is a program that previously was taught as an in-person weekend seminar course. It is designed to help practitioners implement personalized lifestyle medicine and diet modifications into clinical practice. Currently, the FLT program is offered as a virtual program. The information was updated a few years ago with new research, operating guidebook, and patient guidebook, as well as a cookbook. Since this is a virtual program, HCPs are able to learn at their own pace. If they have any questions, our clinical support team is able to help guide them.

ATHM: Metagenics functional medicine PLMx online platform provides access to practitioner patient forms, questionnaires, and lab results. Obviously, you saw a need for such technology.

Ms. McDonald: The PLMx platform is something we're no longer developing and offering. We were trying to support doctors who were doing any type of integrated functional and lifestyle medicine by providing them access to online tools and questionnaires that they could easily give to their patients as part of the onboarding as well as calculate what the results were generated from those questionnaires. We received great initial feedback but decided that the support it needs would take our focus from some of our other exciting initiatives.

ATHM: Is Metagenics one of the few companies that offer an opportunity for practitioners to have an online product store?

Ms. McDonald: We do have an online store that was launched more than 20 years ago. Seems crazy but it might have even been longer than that. We have worked over the years to make the store more user friendly and are working to launch a third version, most likely in 2024, that will continue to enhance the experience for both the practitioner and the patient. One of the highlights of the Metagenics store is that a doctor can easily make a recommendation for the patient to join the store and when the patient is ready to transact, they will be prompted to set their password and automatically enrolled into the practitioner's store. That patient will be connected to that practitioner. It's a way for us to understand the affiliation of a particular patient and practitioner. As we embark on our brand awareness campaign, we can assist practitioners to stay connected with their patients. Our marketing campaigns can serve as an opportunity to remind patients who've been under the care of a practitioner but not actively seeing them, to re-engage. In a recent campaign that we conducted on social media, about 62% of all transactions were from patients who hadn't purchased from us or the practitioner in over six months. Our brand awareness campaign creates an opportunity to assist practitioners in keeping patients on their recommended care.

ATHM: Social media has opened up an entirely different world for doctors, patients, and consumers. How has your marketing strategy addressed this?

Ms. McDonald: Our strategy is to help practitioners connect with patients based on emerging trends we are currently seeing in healthcare. I was recently at an industry lecture where a naturopath talked about what her life was like 20 years ago in practice, and what it is today. Today, her patients may be finding their education on TikTok, coming to her and asking what they need versus coming to her for an opinion and expertise. We want to have an impact on these social media channels in a positive way. We are currently working to assemble a team of practitioners that can serve as digital influencers to get proper education in front of patients. We're also working our best to create awareness so that when a patient is introduced to a Metagenics product they will have greater awareness of our brand prior to sitting in the doctor's office, thus allowing the doctor to spend less time trying to explain our brand and more time actively engaged in their patient's treatment. We're also working to bridge the healthcare practitioner's conventional and integrated world with brand awareness. We feel like we're in an excellent position to do so.

Another important thing to communicate to patients is their awareness that nutritional supplements do not work like medications. You need to give it time. It's important for us to help support a patient through their health journey on behalf of the practitioners.

ATHM: Can you review a few products that make Metagenics unique?

Ms. McDonald: I think we have a few unique products that really set us apart. One such product is our multivitamin mineral product called PhytoMulti. We developed that product and took phytonutrients along with vitamin minerals to give that one-two punch in helping to improve cellular health. We have a patented blend of phytonutrients that we tested in human cells to see if it could keep the DNA stable of which it was able to do. We were able to demonstrate that this will do what you're taking a multivitamin

for which is to create that antioxidant protection against your DNA. Then we also studied it in humans and saw that it had really good effects on their health markers and was bioavailable meaning we were seeing those nutrients get into their blood stream. It's a two a day. That's very comprehensive for the patient.

We were one of the first companies to launch a product called SPM Active, which is a specialized pro-resolving mediator (SPM). SPMs are derived from essential fatty acids, particularly omega-3 fatty acids like EPA and DHA through a series of enzymatic reactions. As a person ages or deals with other health issues, their body might not be able to carry out the enzymatic reactions it should. They may have lower SPM levels which have been associated with various types of health dysfunction. We collaborated with some of the founders in the area of SPM technology to launch this unique formula. It is the only SPM on the market that has been studied in humans. There are different suppliers who make SPMs and different companies that offer them. But none of them have human research. We have exclusivity on that particular form of the product.

We also offer two women's health products that are being used by both integrative practitioners as well as conventional doctors like OB-GYNs. The first is Estrovera featuring ERr731 that has been shown to reduce 12 menopausal symptoms quite effectively. Unlike hormone therapy, ERr 731 contains no estrogen and acts like a selective estrogen receptor modulator for ER β receptors and may offer a higher degree of safety while maintaining the desired efficacy profile.

The second is Ultra Flora Women's which is a probiotic to help support vaginal health. It too has great clinicals and we're seeing great adoption by conventional OB-GYNs and feedback of how effective it's been to help their patients, especially patients who've had to be on recurrent antibiotic therapy.

ATHM: Selling your products becomes a revenue generator for doctors. Do you have sales guidelines?

Ms. McDonald: We let doctors choose for themselves if they want to just recommend the product, or they would prefer to resell the product. Both options are available. We want to meet the doctors where they are and what fits into their practice. Some of our practitioners do resell supplements not only ours but other companies, and it can become a revenue stream, but they are welcome to just recommend it and just to clarify, they can set their own price. We have recommended MAPS pricing. But we don't monitor what they do inside of their practice. If they list products online, then we ask them to adhere to MAPS pricing.