The Role of Pharmacists in Managed Health Care Organizations

Pharmacists in managed health care organizations, including health plans and pharmacy benefit management (PBM) companies, are responsible for the delivery of prescription drug benefits to over 200 million Americans. Typically, a managed care organization contracts their services to a plan sponsor, such as a private company or a governmental organization. Pharmacists employed within these managed care organizations are responsible for a broad and diversified range of clinical, quality-oriented drug management services.

There are over 18,000 pharmacists working for health plans and pharmacy benefit management companies. It’s their responsibility to make sure that the plan they design provides individual patients with appropriate drugs and drug therapies, conveniently and cost-effectively. It’s a complex job, involving the expert skills of clinically trained pharmacists at every step in the patient-care process. As with pharmacists who practice in other settings, pharmacists who work in a managed care environment are committed to ensuring that medications are used appropriately to improve a patient’s health. They do this by performing functions within the following categories:

- Drug Distribution and Dispensing
- Patient Safety
- Clinical Program Development
- Communication with Patients, Prescribers and Pharmacists
- Drug Benefit Design
- Business Management
- Cost Management

Drug Distribution and Dispensing

The managed care pharmacist manages the dispensing of prescription drugs to patients:

Through their own pharmacies

Some managed care organizations operate their own pharmacies. Pharmacists who practice at these sites often provide enhanced pharmaceutical services, beyond traditional dispensing, because they are members of a fully integrated patient care system.
Through community pharmacies
Managed care pharmacists contract with broad-based networks of participating pharmacies that meet their quality criteria to fill the prescriptions of their patients. In addition, managed care pharmacists help design sophisticated online eligibility and claims processing systems to manage the approval process for prescription drugs at local pharmacies, and keep detailed records of their patient’s medications.

Through mail order or online service
Pharmacists within mail order or online pharmacies generally assess the legitimacy of prescriptions, eligibility for coverage, appropriateness of that medication and safety for the patient. They may manage or oversee dispensing operations as well.

Through collaboration with physicians and other prescribers
Pharmacists within managed care organizations may review a patient’s drug profile to help safeguard against unintended side effects in new prescriptions. They may also work with prescribers to assure that the drugs prescribed are eligible for coverage; are lower cost, high quality generic products when appropriate; and are projected to do no harm.

Patient Safety
Managed care pharmacists help ensure patient safety by analyzing prescription claims data to identify problematic prescription use patterns, intervening with prescribers and patients to help correct such problems and educating prescribers about best practices associated with the use of prescription drugs. They design and administer:

- Drug Utilization Review (DUR) programs: This process can identify potential prescription-related problems such as drug/drug interactions, duplication of drugs, known allergies, under- or overdosing or inappropriate therapy.
- Prior Authorization (PA or “Prior Auth”) programs: An approval process that encourages proper use of medications and discourages inappropriate prescribing of complex drugs.
- Monitoring programs: Some drugs require lab-based monitoring for dosage adjustment. Monitoring programs assure that drugs that are prescribed safely and used appropriately.
- Quality Assurance (QA) programs: Programs that enhance patient safety and improve the ways in which patients use drugs.
Clinical Program Development

In order to enhance patient care, particularly for patients with chronic conditions whose quality of life depends on prescription drugs, managed care pharmacists design clinical programs that:

- Evaluate scientific evidence in order to select appropriate drugs for a patient population…
  
  A thorough evaluation of the scientific and clinical data regarding new drugs must be made by a panel of clinical experts within managed care organizations. Called Pharmacy and Therapeutic (P&T) Committees, these panels generally include pharmacists, physicians and other medical professionals.

- Assess the effectiveness of new treatments for diseases…
- Use evidence-based clinical and research data to create disease management programs that help patients live more successfully with their medical conditions…
- Increase understanding of the ways in which clinical therapies affect quality of life, and implement programs that help assure such quality is achieved…
- Explore ways of managing patients with chronic conditions who are dependent on comprehensive drug therapies…
- Design and conduct outcomes-based research in order to help patients achieve the desired results from their drug therapy, and enhance their ability to make quality-of-life decisions.

Communications with Patients, Prescribers and Pharmacists

Managed care pharmacists design and use communication protocols to assure that there is an exchange of necessary information between patients, their physicians and their pharmacists. Communications are required to:

- Help physicians and other prescribers choose drugs that will meet patients’ needs and be eligible for coverage…
- Provide patients with information on their individual prescription history through personalized reports…
- Educate patients about drugs they are taking or those being suggested by their physicians…
- Provide a dispensing pharmacist with a patient’s drug profile in order to identify any potential adverse drug reactions or duplicate therapies…
- Help patients manage their health care and help physicians address complex drug therapy questions.
Plan Benefit Design

Managed care pharmacists collaborate with other health care professionals to design effective benefit structures that will service a specific population’s needs. The pharmacist uses clinical knowledge and practical experience to address such design matters as:

- Whether a formulary (the approved list of medications that a plan will cover) should be used and, if so, whether it should be a “restricted” or “open” plan; whether to establish a patient cost-sharing structure for generic, covered brand-name medications and non-formulary drugs...
- Whether a “participating” pharmacy network should be established and, if so, how expansive should the network of community, mail order and online pharmacies be to service the population properly; what criteria for quality assurance should participating pharmacies be expected to meet...
- What criteria and procedures for drug utilization should be established to help safeguard that (1) patient safety and best outcomes are maximized, and (2) that patients receive the correct drug at the correct dosage, understand why they are being asked to take the drug, and are compliant in taking the drug.

Business Management

Managed care pharmacists contract with employer and health plan clients, pharmacies and manufacturers to structure business arrangements which:

- Allow their clients to customize clinical and reporting requirements that meet their individual population needs...
- Negotiate with manufacturers for discounts on drug prices for clients in exchange for moving market share when clinically appropriate...
- Assist clients in assessing the appropriateness of new drugs...
- Establish networks of pharmacies to provide accessibility for patient populations and assure participating pharmacy compliance with patient safety and quality programs...

Cost Management

Managed care pharmacists help their clients (employers, HMOs, trust funds, Medicaid, etc.) evaluate and improve their pharmacy benefit by:

- Encouraging prescribers to make cost effective drug choices when clinically appropriate...
- Integrating improvements so that costs are actually saved, not merely shifted...
Introducing system interventions that enhances the quality of patient care and saves costs...

Using data to identify compliance and noncompliance with prescribing guidelines, and, by creating measures for assessing physician performance, identifying prescribing patterns and determining opportunities for improvement.

This brief overview of the many roles that pharmacists play within managed care organizations is meant to impart a very basic understanding of the wide range of activities that managed care pharmacists undertake every day. For more detailed information, see AMCP’s Concepts in Managed Care Pharmacy Series at www.amcp.org/professional_res/concepts/index_concepts.asp:

- Pharmaceutical Care
- Disease State Management/Health Management
- Formulary Management
- Outcome Research
- Pharmacists’ Cognitive Services
- Drug Use Evaluation
- Patient Confidentiality
- The Electronic Prescription Record

Academy of Managed Care Pharmacy
100 North Pitt Street
Suite 400
Alexandria, Virginia  22031
800-827-2627
http://www.amcp.org