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Smarter Pharmacy Benefits: How Mobile Technology Communications Improve Pharmacy Utilization and Cut Costs

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For employers and payers, finding new strategies to improve pharmacy benefits and meet member health care needs has become a challenge. mHealth, the use of mobile software and smartphone technology, empowers members to take control of their own health, access medical information, and improve compliance, leading to overall improved population health and lower health care costs.

The impact of the "smart revolution" is a key health care trend that is likely to continue. A recent study found that nearly 17 million consumers were accessing health information on mobile devices in 2011, representing a 125 percent increase from 2010. These statistics leave experts predicting that health care and medical app downloads will reach 44 million this year and 142 million by 2016. What's more, an increasing number of remote health monitoring apps have been designed to help simplify the management of chronic diseases while also presenting a new and effective means for reducing the cost burden of unhealthy lifestyles and aging populations.

A well-designed mobile-access and mobile-platform technology strategy makes it simpler for employers and health plans to meet health needs where and when it is needed — which is increasingly at the plan members' convenience. In addition, the smartphone strategy greatly streamlines the management of chronic diseases and pharmacy utilization.

Accessing Essential Pharmacy Information

Smartphone technology and mobile Web site capabilities give health plan members easy access to essential medical and pharmacy benefit–related information, including:

- in-network provider directories and directions to offices;
- pharmacy and medical benefit summaries and claims history;
- drug formularies and drug prior authorization status;
- deductible summaries and cost-sharing requirements;
- drug prices of nearby pharmacies and expected out-of-pocket costs with generic and therapeutic alternatives;
- self-diagnosis tools with symptom and disease lookup features;
- daily wellness tracking tools for achieving health-related goals;
- health-related symptom checkers;
- reminders and alerts for prescription drug compliance; and
- options for in-home monitoring and in-home care.

With so much information at their fingertips, plan members are empowered to make better choices that can increase prescription drug adherence, reduce costs associated with emergency care, and improve the overall quality of health care. In addition, health-related

apps support programmatic interventions and provide members with a simple means for self-managing existing health-related conditions.

Apps can also serve as decision-support tools for health care providers and pharmacy benefit managers (PBMs), allowing them to quickly connect plan members to appropriate care sites, encourage healthy behaviors, deliver compliance alerts, and suggest additional prescription drug purchasing channels, such as mail order and retail discount options.

Given the ability to provide instant access to information, employers and payers have an opportunity to influence plan member behaviors in order to lower rates and improve overall health and productivity. Additionally, health apps can help streamline the flow of information between health plans, physicians, and patients — facilitating one-on-one exchanges that close gaps in care, shorten medical response times, and improve the overall health care system.

Integrating and Accessing Drug Information

Designing an effective mobile strategy begins by partnering with a service provider that can offer Web-based platforms that automate labor-intensive processes, such as gathering, integrating, and accessing drug claim histories and formulary data. These platforms also should have the capabilities of delivering:

- personal notifications to members regarding drugs that require prior authorization;
- personalized messaging to increase the effectiveness of consumer engagement communications; and
- Web-based reporting applications that measure changes in pharmacy utilization and prescription drug adherence for chronically ill patient populations.

Automated personal mobile application services — combined with reporting applications that measure the appropriate use and effectiveness of health care — inevitably will increase satisfaction for every stakeholder by:

- saving time and money across the health care delivery system;
- simplifying pharmacy benefit design understanding and utilization;
- enhancing the effectiveness of medication therapy management and value-based drug benefit designs; and
- integrating financial data from the increasingly popular consumer-directed/high-deductible health plans (CDHPs).

This last point is important, given that 47 percent of individuals insured through employers have chosen high deductible plans and pay about $133 less for family health coverage.[1]

A unified approach to mobile access through an integrated suite of applications provides the best approach for enabling informed and personalized decision-making. The ideal PBM tool relies on a pharmacy utilization and reporting application to support member care and enable clinical pharmacists and staff members to improve member pharmacy utilization by encouraging adherence to medications for chronic health conditions, such as diabetes and asthma. This kind of solution can cut costs by identifying preferred brands and generic drugs and by enabling pharmacists to work collaboratively with members who are at risk for adverse drug events.

Timely, Effective Medication

Research shows that 25 percent of patients prescribed medications for a new illness fail to fill their initial prescription.[2] Half of patients taking maintenance medication for chronic disease stop taking their medication within a year of starting therapy, costing the health care system billions of dollars in unnecessary medical care. The goal is to ensure that each member is using the appropriate medication in a timely and efficient way.

Once an effective mobile strategy is in place, members can take greater control of their own health and work more closely with their in-network health care providers. This is especially true for those who are incentivized by the possibility of saving money and reducing out-of-pocket health care expenses.

For the most part, health-related apps are used for information retrieval, with some mobile devices providing more one-on-one interaction. As more hospitals and provider networks begin to develop networked apps for their providers, physicians will be able to extend their clinical tools — and reach — to more people. Along these same lines, apps designed for physicians will become increasingly better connected to patients' clinical records so that information can be readily shared between health care providers. At the point of care, these apps create an environment of Web applications and services that work in collaboration and are designed to connect and support patients, caregivers, and providers.[3] ■

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Endnotes:

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