

Review

COMMUNITY PHARMACIES, THE FUTURE OF HEALTHCARE IN THE U.S.

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ABSTRACT

In response to the Affordable Care Act, innovations are taking place in the healthcare industry to improve patient healthcare and reduce costs. Over the past twenty years, the pharmacy profession has transformed into a position of offering innovative solutions for the nation's most critical healthcare issues (Johnsen, 2015). Neighborhood pharmacies are becoming the new face of healthcare, with one-on-one consulting, medication dispensing and management, and vaccinations. Remote healthcare monitoring devices (telemedicine), such as the Dyno, can allow patients to take charge of their personal healthcare at home, reducing or eliminating trips to the physician's office or the hospital. These innovations are leading to more efficiency in healthcare and reductions in healthcare costs, and can provide healthcare to underserved communities.

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INTRODUCTION

Several innovative trends are transforming the healthcare industry. Since costs for specialty medications and generics are spiraling, and advanced genomic-based screenings are available at pharmacies and retail clinics, patients are moving away from traditional primary care sites. Patients now have access to tele-health and wearable high-tech devices that monitor and transmit real-time health conditions (Frederick, 2015). The impetus behind this new health model is the Affordable Care Act, which is fully implementing health reform, combined with an "aging population, a genomics revolution, nanotechnology, data management and other technologies" (Eder, 2015). Fortunately, over the past twenty years, the pharmacy profession has transformed into a position of offering "new and innovative solutions to some of the nation's most urgent healthcare issues" (Johnsen, 2015).

However, the rapidly transforming health system in the U.S. is facing challenges, such as accountability, cost-effectiveness and a coherent system of care. The most formidable challenge is the escalating "\$2.5 trillion annual healthcare bill, which now consumes roughly 18% of the GDP" (Frederick, 2015). Another challenge is the critical shortage of primary care physicians which makes it difficult for patients to have timely access to health services. Finally, there is mounting pressure on "federal and state health resources as aging boomers and newly insured Americans" take advantage of Medicare and Medicaid.

PricewaterhouseCoopers, in a recent report on the new health economy, indicates that companies are empowering consumers with innovative health care solutions that are changing the entire industry (Eder, 2015). One leading trend influencing pharmacies and the nation's health system is the community pharmacy which until now has been an underutilized part of the nation's healthcare system. Providing patient easier access to healthcare will decrease costs of healthcare and improve health outcomes. Community pharmacies allow "patient access, lower costs, accountability and collaborative care," making them the "true face of neighborhood healthcare" (Frederick, 2015).

Pharmacists are an important part of building the "healthcare delivery system of tomorrow...in partnership with doctors, nurses and others," according to Steve Anderson, president and CEO of the National Association of Chain Drug Stores. By collaborating with other healthcare professionals, pharmacists are in the unique position of providing patient services in "under-served communities where healthcare may not be readily available" (Frederick, 2015).

Community pharmacists, as professionals who dispense prescription drugs, provide counseling, and manage medication therapy on a daily basis, are a critical segment delivering healthcare. "An estimated 82% of Americans use daily medications to manage their health, and 29% take five or more medications, according to the Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention” (Frederick, 2015). “Over 2.7 billion prescriptions” are filled by chain store pharmacies every year, offering assistance to patients with the proper and safe use of medications that improve health and affordability (Frederick, 2015). Allowing pharmacists to “provide state-approved health services to underserved Medicare beneficiaries couldn’t come at a better time” (Frederick, 2015). Community pharmacists can meet patient needs by integrating services such as “immunizations, health screenings, medication therapy management, and diabetes management” using face-to-face encounters with patients (Frederick 2015). By using just one consultation, the local pharmacist can administer one vaccination, “medication synchronization, and a health screening,” making Americans beneficiaries of this growing effort to achieve the overall potential of neighborhood pharmacies as providers of healthcare (Frederick, 2015).

Many pharmacies are also turning to remote care platforms (telemedicine) for their customers to engage them in their own health, “reducing risk for unplanned utilization of costly services” (Johnsen, 2015). Home care devices can monitor biometric data, such as blood pressure, allowing for customized daily patient care. If a clinical condition should worsen, the patient’s physician is immediately alerted to intervene if necessary (Johnsen, 2015). This next-generation of consumer care joins cloud computing with “consumer-grade electronics” and an interface that is user-friendly to facilitate use by all demographics, even patients with limited technical ability. This will enable patient monitoring in the home, reducing the necessity for “hospital admissions and readmissions” (Johnsen, 2015).

Some remote healthcare devices (telemedicine) are already in place in community pharmacies, such as Vivify Health, (Johnsen, 2015), and others are on the horizon, such as the Dyno from DynoSense Corporation, Sunnyvale, CA. “Dyno is the world’s first fully integrated multi-function health scanner technology that can capture more than 33

critical health metrics in less than 60 seconds with a single user action. The captured health data is securely and wirelessly uploaded to the company’s cloud computing platform for further analytics and processing, and is then communicated with healthcare professionals” (DynoSense, 2015). This device can be easily used in the home for immediate and daily health monitoring.

CONCLUSION

The community pharmacy is positioned to alleviate the nation’s overburdened healthcare system using front-line consulting and health management, along with telemedicine platforms using remote healthcare monitoring devices.

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