The Formulary: How Pharmacy Technicians Can Promote Health Equity in Medication Therapy Management

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According to the CDC, "health equity is achieved when every person has the opportunity to 'attain his or her full health potential' and no one is 'disadvantaged from achieving this potential because of social position or other socially determined circumstances.'"[1] Two domains of the social determinants of health include: 1) healthcare access and quality and 2) economic stability. An individual's limitations in these domains can have a direct impact on their use of pharmacy services and benefits and can negatively affect medication adherence.[2] Specifically, the Healthy People 2030 Access to Health Services Workgroup AHS-06 objective in the healthcare access and quality domain is to "reduce the proportion of people who can't get prescription medicines when they need them."[3] The United States Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) recommends "addressing financial barriers" to patients' prescription access to improve medication adherence; nevertheless, these financial barriers are a direct result of the economic stability domain.[4,5]

All providers and community health workers, including pharmacists and certified pharmacy technicians, should be aiming for health equity in every patient encounter. By offering a medication therapy management

Abstract

Health equity means that everyone should be as healthy as reasonably possible, which includes medication adherence and financial well-being. Medication adherence is affected when patients are not able to obtain medication due to financial barriers. Pharmacy technicians are responsible for many of the administrative tasks associated with medication therapy management (MTM). These tasks include generating a personal medication record (PMR) and billing for service. Pharmacy technicians can help reduce the financial burden on patients by identifying formulary medications and their associated tiers on a patient's PMR. This article outlines the tasks a pharmacy technician should complete to identify formulary drugs during MTM to help with patients' health equity.

(MTM) consultation to every eligible patient, pharmacy technicians can lay a foundation to achieve objective AHS-06.

Pharmacy Technicians and Medication Therapy Management

The role of the pharmacy technician in MTM is to schedule patients; complete a patient history and personal medication record (PMR); and to process insurance and billing.[6,7] The patient history typically includes personal and demographic information (e.g., name, date of birth, age, gender) and medical history (e.g., allergies, health conditions), and the PMR is a list of current medications and supplements (including strength, dosage, and frequency).[7] In an effort to improve the MTM process, ensure patient cost is favorable, and increase medication adherence, pharmacy technicians should be familiar with formularies.

Formularies

A formulary is a list of medications covered by a patient's prescription drug plan.[8,9] It lists medications covered by tiers or levels. These tiers describe the amount

of coverage provided by the insurance company and/or the co-pay or co-insurance amount expected from the patient.[8,9] Patients with financial constraints need to minimize the cost of their medication while still receiving appropriate drug therapy; in other words, these patients need to optimize their medication costs.

Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

Cost optimization is important to guarantee equitable healthcare; therefore, pharmacy technicians should indicate the status of a patient's current medication in the patient's formulary prior to handing the records off to the pharmacist. To do this, a technician must know how to:[8-10]

1. **Locate a patient's formulary online or over the phone.** Many prescription drug insurance cards have a customer service number and/or website where a patient's formulary information may be obtained.

2. **Read and interpret a formulary.** Formularies include drug name, drug category, coverage, and tier. A pharmacy technician should be able to distinguish each of these items.

3. **Indicate whether a prescription drug is covered.** If a prescription drug is not covered by insurance, an alternative drug that is covered may be selected during medication reconciliation. For duplicate therapies, this allows the non-covered drug to be eliminated in the medication reconciliation.

4. **Determine the coverage tier if covered.** For patients with limited resources, the ability to select lower-cost drugs where appropriate would lessen the financial burden of medication costs. An appropriate generic, alternative therapy, or preferred brand drug could significantly reduce drug costs.

5. **Obtain a prior authorization form if the prescription drug is not covered.** For necessary medications that are not covered by insurance, a prior authorization should be completed to affirm medical necessity. Obtaining the form for non-covered drugs will help to fast-track the prior authorization process, which often takes between 24 and 96 hours. This 1- to 4-day turn-around could drastically affect medication adherence.

Conclusion

The five formulary skills that a technician should be familiar with will assist in reducing the financial burden of prescription drug costs; however, this is merely a starting point, because some insurance companies do not cover all strengths or NDCs of medications, may have a supply limit, or may have a step therapy requirement.[10] Health equity is a challenging goal that cannot be achieved in one fell swoop, but it will be done gradually. Consequently, the pharmacy technician's use of formularies in MTM is a solid first step in undertaking one objective of the social determinants of health.

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