

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON SCHOOL OF PHARMACY STUDENT WRITING CLUB:

# Business Member Spotlight: Dr. Jessica Benjamin, SSM Health St. Mary's Hospital

by Salma E. Abdelwahab, 2023 PharmD Candidate, Rachel A. Hawley, 2023 PharmD Candidate, Emily A. LaMonte, 2023 PharmD Candidate

**S**SM Health is a Catholic, not-for-profit health system and integrated delivery network that delivers care throughout Illinois, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Wisconsin.<sup>1</sup> SSM Health St. Mary's Hospital (Madison, Wisconsin) is a 400-bed community hospital and one of 23 hospitals in the health system. The mission of SSM Health is, "Through our exceptional health care services, we reveal the healing presence of God."<sup>2</sup> SSM Health not only strives to provide optimal care to its patients, but it also aims to give back to the community. At St. Mary's Hospital, Dr. Jessica Benjamin, PharmD, the regional manager of quality and safety, is playing an important role in providing quality patient care and advancing the pharmacy profession.

Benjamin graduated with a bachelor's degree in biomedical engineering from Washington University in St. Louis and worked at Epic as a Willow implementation manager. After several years of working closely with pharmacist informaticists and clinical pharmacists, Benjamin decided to embark on a career change and applied to pharmacy school.

Benjamin attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison. After pharmacy school, she worked at the Pharmacy Society of Wisconsin (PSW) as the Wisconsin Pharmacy Quality Collaborative (WPQC) operations manager, where she helped community pharmacies expand their WPQC medication therapy management (MTM) programs. Benjamin enjoyed her experience working at PSW and partnering with community pharmacies, because she observed community pharmacists practicing at the top of their license and providing clinical services. Importantly, WPQC is a reimbursement model that pays pharmacies for clinical/cognitive services and is not tied to dispensing medication.

In the fall of 2015, Benjamin joined SSM Health St. Mary's Madison as the

medication safety pharmacist. Her role evolved over time, and she now is the regional manager of quality and safety for the Wisconsin region (which includes seven SSM Health hospitals). In her new role, she works with the vice president of pharmacy services and pharmacy directors to advance the pharmacy practice model and promote medication safety. She believes that pharmacists are valuable members of the healthcare team and improve the quality of care for patients every single day.

## Day-to-Day Practice & Raising the Bar

As the regional manager of quality and safety, Benjamin strives to advance and improve patient care every day. Benjamin facilitates monthly Pharmacy and Therapeutics Committee meetings to determine which medications should be on formulary based on their clinical effectiveness, safety, and cost. Much effort is spent aligning pharmacy clinical practice across the Wisconsin hospitals within SSM Health. She also leads medication safety meetings and collaborates on interdisciplinary process improvement projects to continually assess and improve the medication-use process to advance safety.

Benjamin continuously drafts protocols to optimize patient care and increase pharmacy involvement in the patient care process. She works with the regional clinical coordinator and the regional antimicrobial stewardship (AMS) pharmacist at St. Mary's to standardize protocols and procedures. For example, Benjamin worked with the AMS pharmacist and AMS medical director to develop a community acquired pneumonia (CAP) protocol to have pharmacists more involved in monitoring CAP patients to reduce antimicrobial resistance.

Medication safety is another important aspect of Benjamin's role. She analyzes

medication-related events and presents the findings to the medication safety committee. When a safety incident arises, Benjamin frequently questions whether an underlying systemic cause exists, and considers retrospective solutions to prevent the event from occurring again. For example, Benjamin's implementation of barcode scanning of IV products in central pharmacy significantly reduced dispensing errors that were sent to the nursing units. One of the most important aspects of Benjamin's safety role is to create an environment that allows other healthcare professionals to voice their input regarding safe medication practices and ensure that their concerns and ideas are heard.

A key part of Benjamin's job is change management. Whenever the pharmacy department initiates a clinical or operational change, it's crucial to engage key

Below: Dr. Jessica Benjamin, PharmD



stakeholders prior to and during the change to solicit feedback and communicate about relevant changes to their respective teams.

## Bumps in the Road

All professionals encounter bumps in the road at some point in their career. Dr. Benjamin acknowledges that one of the challenges she faces working within an extremely large health system is that most changes involve obtaining buy-in from multiple hospitals and departments (especially when it involves Epic or other technology-related changes). Thus, change timelines are often long and there are frequently individuals who resist change. Benjamin says she overcomes these challenges by having “a lot of tenacity.” She emphasizes that perseverance and tenacity are key to implementing change.

Benjamin demonstrated these key skills in response to a serious medication event that happened in operating suites. The medication packaging included some design flaws that allowed it to be given via the wrong route. After learning the details of the event, Benjamin discussed the design flaw with the manufacturer and wrote an article for the Institute of Safe Medication Practices. She is working to remove the medication from formulary for all of SSM Health until the design flaw is fixed. By doing so, Benjamin advocates not only for the safety of SSM patients, but also for patients across the country. Benjamin put the hospital’s mission front and center, where safety methods and best practices for optimal patient care are the main focus. Despite fear of pushback, there was an established culture of safety at her place of work, where she felt valued, safe to speak up, and able to advocate for change.

## Moving Forward

Benjamin loves being an integral part of a team. Inspired by strong mentors during her early career at PSW, she is passionate about shaping the next generation of pharmacy leaders. Her advice for aspiring pharmacist leaders includes: Advocate for the profession and the value it provides; tell the story as well as the facts when proposing a change; and model optimism. To help manage negativity in the workplace, she uses empathetic listening (i.e., maybe the negative person in question is just not heard, or is being dismissed); being resilient



Above: Outside SSM Health St. Mary's Hospital in Madison, WI.

(e.g., “Don’t let others get you down”); and tying in to people’s intrinsic motivation (that will usually get them on board).

Benjamin also shares her thoughts about being a woman and a leader in pharmacy. She says that, “as [women], we face unique challenges, but it’s important to be confident in the knowledge that [we] have and the talent that [we] bring.” She encourages everyone who aspires to become a leader in pharmacy to “be in touch with [their] inner voice” in order to advocate for positive change.

A piece of advice that shaped how Benjamin got to where she is today is to “be open-minded, and [not] say no.” Benjamin says she “tried to be open-minded during all of [her] rotations to see different things,” and “was always one of the first to volunteer.” The most translatable skill Benjamin learned in pharmacy school is critical thinking. Being open-minded and adaptable has transformed Benjamin’s role at St. Mary’s Hospital. She started her career with SSM as a medication safety pharmacist. Next, Benjamin was facilitating P&T committees, aligning services between hospitals within the Wisconsin region, and advancing pharmacy practice every day.

---

Salma E. Abdelwahab, Rachel A. Hawley, and Emily A. LaMonte are 3rd Year Doctor of Pharmacy Candidates at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Pharmacy in Madison, WI.

*Disclosure: The author(s) declare no real or potential conflicts or financial interest in any product or*

*service mentioned in the manuscript, including grants, equipment, medications, employment, gifts, and honoraria.*

## References

1. About SSM Health. SSM Health. Accessed February 8, 2021. <https://www.ssmhealth.com/resources/about>
2. Our Mission & Values. SSM Health. Accessed February 8, 2021. <https://www.ssmhealth.com/resources/about/mission-values>