

# More Than Prescriptions

## Pharmacists Help Fill Health Care Gap

By Charlee Beasor

DailyMed pharmacists work as liaisons between the patient, doctors and insurance providers and mail pre-packaged prescriptions in boxes to patients.

One are the days when the main role of a pharmacist was to count and distribute pills. Now, it's possible the pharmacist is the health care professional you see the most. Pharmacists are now giving vaccines, educating patients on how to successfully take their medication and catching harmful medication interactions. They are serving as a front line of defense for patient care and are playing an integral role on the health care team, working with doctors and nurses, particularly for those patients with long-term and serious medical conditions.

While the role of the pharmacist has been increasing for several years, recent developments have brought this trend to light – namely federal health care legislation and the nationwide shortage of doctors.

There are a few factors contributing to the trend that aren't as obvious to the public. Dr. Craig Svensson, dean of pharmacy at the Purdue University College of Pharmacy, notes that the sheer number of medications prescribed last year gives an indication as to the importance of pharmacist involvement.

"In 2009, there were over 3.7 billion prescriptions in the United States. The volume has increased very substantially," Svensson says. "There is also an increased use of potent biological products that require monitoring. And many patients are being treated by several different physicians, none of whom have the complete picture of a patient's drug therapy."

He adds, "Most of what (pharmacists) do is cognitive, rather than hands on. A lot of that happens in the background and patients don't realize that's going on, whereas other health care providers are physically touching patients to accomplish what they're providing."

### Drug adherence – a big hurdle

Adherence (the extent to which individuals take their medications as prescribed) is one of the biggest challenges in the health care industry. Non-adherence can result in additional

medical expenditures, emergency room visits and hospital stays, costing millions of dollars a year.

"Patients who get their medications from amber vials aren't very compliant. About 30% of the time patients take their medications correctly," reports Charles Goodall, executive vice president of pharmacy at DailyMed.

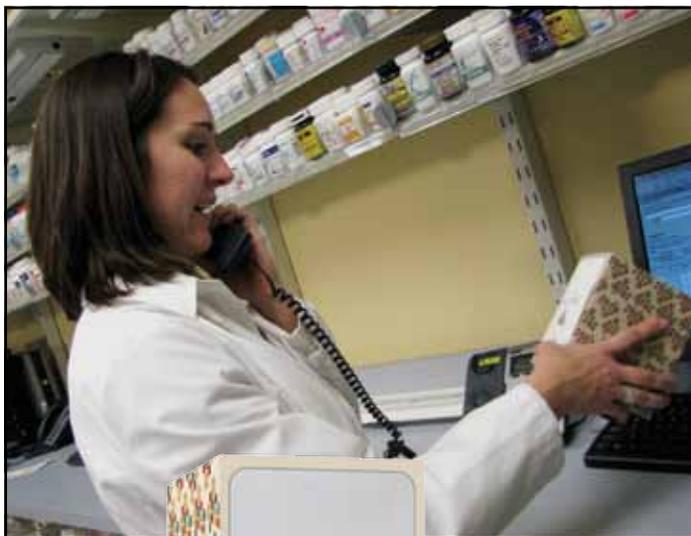
Indianapolis-based DailyMed, a division of Arcadia Health Resources, is a non-traditional pharmacy. Specialized pharmacists speak with patients over the phone and coordinate medication needs among the doctor, patient and insurance company.

Once the patient has an initial consultation with the pharmacist, he or she receives a box that dispenses medication in packets labeled with the date and time of consumption. This is to help ensure that patients take the correct dosages at the correct time of day.

"Our pharmacists are actively involved in the whole practice," Goodall shares. "(Sometimes) it's very complex. One doctor doesn't know what the other doctor is dispensing. We become their medication home. Our goal is to keep people at home healthier and longer; that is the mission statement for our company."

### Medication therapy management

The trend of the non-traditional pharmacy is growing. Alongside it is the use of





**Butler University's pharmacy program is highly regarded. Taking blood pressure and collecting blood samples are among the preparations for students as pharmacists are increasingly asked to help perform these duties** (photos courtesy Dawn Pearson/Butler University).

medication therapy management for patients with long-term illnesses. Often, the pharmacists that work in medication therapy management are specialists in certain fields, just as physicians have the ability to be generalists or specialists.

About a year ago in Whitestown, Medco Health Solutions opened the Medco Therapeutic Resource Center to serve as a place for pharmacists to help oncology patients manage their medications. Medco pharmacists work with patients over the phone and mail prescriptions to more than 850,000 oncology patients across the country.

"They are specialist pharmacists who have had evaluations on the drugs (patients) take, as well as how to counsel them on their drugs and related conditions," offers Dr. Milayna Subar, Medco vice president and national practice leader for oncology.

She acknowledges that the growing use of oral medications for oncology patients is contributing to the need for a therapeutic resource center.

"Oral drugs are now a bigger part. It's just like any other disease – people do have difficulty staying on their medicine. As more medicines are oral for cancer than they used to be, nobody's standing there at the patient's bedside or while they're drinking their coffee saying, 'don't forget to take your pill.' Our pharmacists give patients the tools to make sure they know the importance of taking the medications, and we also have pharmacists who reach out to patients when the prescription hasn't been refilled," Subar explains.

A physician herself, she affirms that pharmacists are "uniquely placed" to assist due to the shortage of primary care doctors.

"The number of physicians or physician appointments to care for oncology patients is being challenged because the balance between patient need and physician access is shrinking. The expectation by 2020 is that it will be acutely a problem," she declares. "The knowledge (pharmacists) have is amazing. They are fully in the loop and have a greater ability to note the whole picture of the patient's pharmacy care."

Jeff Ulanet, vice president of oncology at Medco, says that along with medication therapy management, Medco pharmacists help oncology patients with their nutrition, another step in

keeping the patients healthy.

"Some (drugs) are quite dangerous and have adverse effects on the gut and the throat and can make eating very difficult. By incorporating nutritional counseling, we really can help a patient optimize the drug regimen that's best for them."

### Expanding education

As the demands of pharmacists increased, training and education also had to be adjusted.

"One of the big changes, even just since the turn of the century, has been that a bachelor's degree in pharmacy is no longer awarded in the U.S. All U.S. graduates are trained at the doctor of pharmacy level," explains Dr. Mary Andritz, dean of the College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences at Butler University.

The training for pharmaceutical students at the university level includes a six-year minimum program. Most students spend their last year of the program working in pharmacies, like DailyMed and Medco, as well as in hospitals and community pharmacies, gaining experiential training.

"The major focus of the (last) year is on interacting with other health care professionals, doing patient education and really learning how to be an advocate for patients," Andritz says. "They're realizing it's not just the patient that needs to learn about the medications that they're being prescribed ... pharmacists are being called upon by those prescribing the medicines. We're involved with educating other people about that part of the medical practice – that is our specialty."

Andritz relays that another aspect being taught to students is wellness and prevention, and how to relay the importance of staying healthy to patients.

"People need to make lifestyle changes, and those are the things that are so hard. I think the pharmacist is in a great position to reinforce those things," she adds. "We talk about them being agents of change."

Svensson says Purdue is also tailoring its curriculum to meet the increasing demands of pharmacists.

"We place a greater emphasis on the development of skills necessary for patient education. We're also focusing on the



**Purdue University student Amanda Rennick works with a client at Walgreens Pharmacy under the direction of Patty Elsner, a Purdue graduate and the company's university advocate for professional development** (photo courtesy Mark Simmons/Purdue University).

ability to identify complex medication problems. Third is the ability to work effectively as a health care team," Svensson affirms. "It is increasingly important that a team approach be taken to complex medical problems. We have to utilize the expertise of the variety of health care providers and individualize the appropriate therapy for patients."

### **Bridging the gap**

The trend of increased pharmaceutical care will most likely continue, especially as 30 million new patients come into the health care system when federal reform legislation goes into effect. "There's a range of things pharmacists can do and I think that

will be ever increasing. Education has expanded, but also the opportunities for pharmacists have expanded," Andritz emphasizes.

While the use of pharmacists has increased, both they and physicians agree that a trip to the pharmacist, while an excellent tool, shouldn't replace a visit to the doctor's office.

"I think pharmacists encourage patients to talk about when they were last at the doctor and if they haven't been to the doctor and if they're trying to self-medicate," Andritz mentions. "I think pharmacists do a good job of routing patients to where they need to go. I don't see patients not going to physicians."

Svensson agrees. "We find pharmacists well accepted on the health care team – they're not trying to supplant the role of physicians, just trying to bring their expertise in order to be able to provide really the best drug therapy regiment for patients. They were under-utilized for a period of time with their expertise."

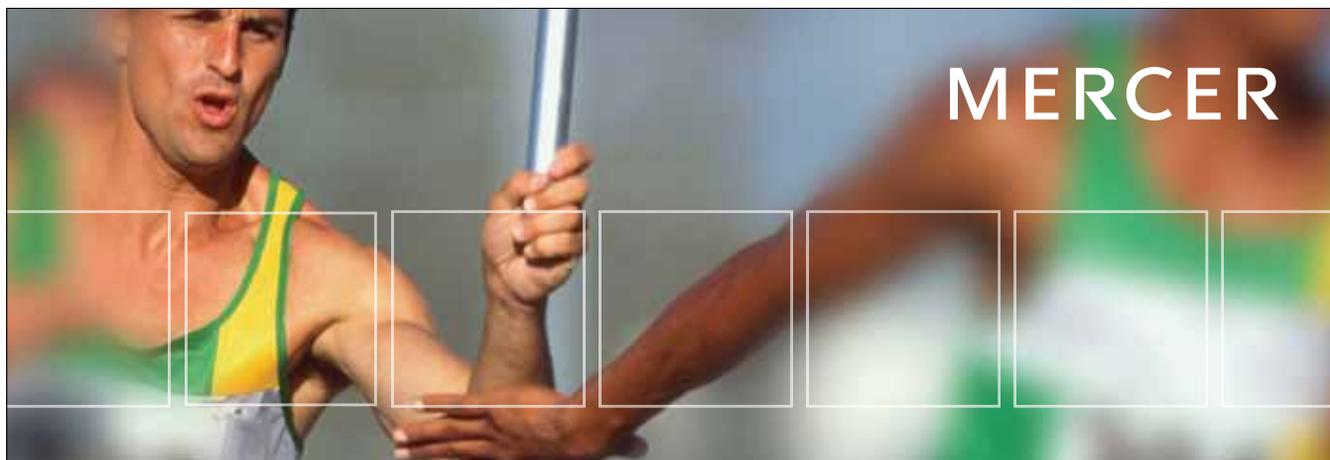
#### **INFORMATION LINK**

**Resources:** Dr. Mary Andritz, Butler University, at [www.butler.edu/pharmacy-pa](http://www.butler.edu/pharmacy-pa)

Charles Goodall, DailyMed, at [www.dailymedrx.com](http://www.dailymedrx.com)

Dr. Milayna Subar and Jeff Ulanet, Medco Health Solutions Inc., at [www.medco.com](http://www.medco.com)

Dr. Craig Svensson, Purdue University, at [www.pharmacy.purdue.edu](http://www.pharmacy.purdue.edu)



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