



Overwhelmed, Overburdened Pharmacists Spend Less Time With Patients, Hurting Retail Pharmacy Business

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The health of a pharmacy business is under attack from many directions, but retail pharmacies can take steps to alleviate some of this pressure to improve the health of their business.

There was a time, not too long ago, when an engaging consultation with your local pharmacist was a typical part of filling one's prescription medication. As recently as 2013, pharmacists spent an average of 2 hours each day counseling patients. There's a good chance they even knew their customers by name.

Anyone who has picked up a prescription in recent years has probably had an entirely different experience. Most of the time, you're lucky if the pharmacist lifts their head from behind the counter to make eye contact. Instructions about medication use are impersonal, delivered either via the cashier working the register or via an electronic keyboard with generic, pre-programmed questions.

It's not that today's pharmacists are uncaring or ambivalent. It's simply a case of being overwhelmed, understaffed, and performing administrative tasks to remain "compliant" with insurance company requirements.

The administrative burdens facing today's retail pharmacists are daunting, driven by several factors:

Increased requirements from third parties mean more time spent chasing down doctors for prior authorizations, reviewing formularies and engaging in a seemingly endless back and forth of phone calls and paperwork before a prescription can be filled.

Regulatory prohibitions levied by some state boards prevent pharmacists from offloading administrative activities to technicians, interns, or junior personnel.

In addition to the typical day-to-day prescription-filling activities—and all that those activities entail—pharmacists have now been asked to take on the role of active clinician-patient care as well.

In too many cases, the pharmacist has become a robotic order-taker with less time than ever to engage with patients. The business of the pharmacy and the health and wellbeing of the pharmacy's patients suffer as a result.

Retail pharmacies can take steps to alleviate some of this burden and, at the same time, improve the health of their own businesses, which are constantly under competitive and economic pressures. Here's how:

1. Lean Into Using More Tech Automation.

Sure, there have been improvements in the past 5 to 10 years in the way retail pharmacies deploy technology. The advent of electronic prescriptions, now extremely widespread, is one example. But the fact is, pharmacies are simply not fully embracing technology.

New platforms have the capability to streamline and automate many of the processes that engulf the time and attention of pharmacists. For example, electronic prior authorization systems can automatically engage the prescribing physician and complete the necessary processes before the script winds up in the pharmacist's hands. Connecting to EMR data systems and leveraging artificial intelligence can quickly reveal details about a patient's medical history relevant to the drugs they've been prescribed and streamline the process for securing approval.

On balance, the retail pharmacy industry is woefully behind in implementing the technology that can allow pharmacists to return their focus to quality of care.

2. Change the Paradigm by Going to Bat for Pharmacists.

Retail pharmacies need to go to bat for their pharmacists and take on both state boards and pharmacy benefit managers to create a more favorable working environment. As mentioned earlier, too many pharmacists are hamstrung by outdated, antiquated and, in some cases, nonsensical rules that dictate how much support they can access from technicians and interns and how they can be utilized in the pharmacy.

Pharmacists should be able to lean on their clinical capabilities to switch a simple prescription without having to track down physicians and chew up the precious time of the health care system. Chasing down payments and co-pays should be the purview of others in the ecosystem. It's incumbent on retail pharmacies to push for these types of changes.

3. Embrace an Evolving Clinical Role for Pharmacists.

The urgent push for vaccinations against COVID-19 converted pharmacists, many of whom may have been content to remain behind the counter, into a veritable army of immunizers. Retail pharmacies should continue to empower and enable pharmacists to deliver value-added clinical services like vaccinations, long after the hopeful conclusion of the pandemic. With necessary training, pharmacists can ultimately deepen the relationship with the patient by delivering more than just medication, cultivating greater trust and loyalty to the pharmacy.

The health of a pharmacy business is under attack from many directions. Ongoing reimbursement challenges and the emergence of specialist mail pharmacies are among the range of growing threats. Pharmacist burnout is up there, too. Empowering and enabling pharmacists to deliver the time, attention and enhanced quality of care patients crave will both preserve pharmacists' collective sanity and bolster the health of the business.


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