Thrifty White an Rx innovator

FARGO, N.D. — Traditionally, advancements in the practice and professionalism of community pharmacy have come incrementally, one small step at a time. Often, minor gains have been offset by narrowly conceived restrictive barriers advocated or put in place by health care constituencies less interested in advancements in the relevance of pharmacy than in influencing and manipulating the larger health care community.

Now comes an innovative initiative from a Minnesota-based 89-store drug chain with outlets across six states in the upper Midwest that shows every initial indication of nudging the practice of pharmacy from a profession dependent on and tied to the dispensing of prescription drugs to one whose success is based on the professional involvement, knowledge, wisdom, judgment and commitment of the pharmacist.

The drug chain in question is Thrifty White Pharmacy, and the series of initiatives it has rolled out over the past two years has succeeded in eliminating many of the mechanical functions that have traditionally defined and limited the role of the pharmacist at store level, replacing them with an expanded role in patient counseling and medication therapy management.

The programs turn on the inarguable premise that the pharmacist’s professional life is tied to doing more than dispensing...
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prescriptions, and indeed that encourage adherence to compliance and managing the patient’s medication therapy is the role pharmacists must play going forward. The practice of medication therapy management can have a positive influence on health care outcomes. According to a 2009 New York Times article, a study, poor medication adherence results in over $290 billion annually in avoidable costs to the U.S. health care system.

To that end, the filling of maintenance prescriptions has been largely transferred from the individual stores to state-of-the-art, robotically dependent central-fill facilities located here. Prescriptions are filled more quickly and consistently, are more filled, with no decline in safety or accuracy. Prescriptions are then shipped daily by courier to the individual store’s state-of-the-art central-fill facility to the patient’s home or business address.

Utilizing the central-fill option — some 65% of Thrifty White’s total maintenance prescriptions are now filled at these facilities — has led to initiatives that allow the pharmacist the freedom to perform more duties. Community pharmacists have been educated and trained, though not always encouraged, to perform these initiatives include:

• Ready Refill — Maintenance prescriptions are automatically filled ahead of time and are ready for the patient each month. The pharmacy will even call to let the patient know the prescription is ready. The key to the success of the central-fill facility to process maintenance prescriptions ahead of time, from which they are shipped overnight to the individual stores or, should the patient prefer, delivered or mailed to his home or office.

• Medication Synchronization (Med Sync) — perhaps the most significant of the Thrifty White initiatives, Med Sync encourages patients to pick up all their monthly prescriptions at the same designated date each month. An automated call notifications are made before prescription pickup is scheduled, both to determine if the patient’s drug regimen has changed and to get the patient’s anticipated pickup date. Two additional calls are made to insure the patient picks up the prescription as scheduled. The patient is notified of less than 10 days to 30 days of therapy. These initiatives have brought a new recognition of the possibilities and the potential to America’s oldest drug chain.

We’re finding that medication therapy management helps keep costs down.

The central objective — encouraging patient compliance when they use the Thrifty White Med Sync program — says Thrifty White president Bob Narveson. These cornerstone programs are supplemented by other initiatives designed to increase compliance. Specifically, Thrifty White offers patients Healthy- PackRx Compliance Packaging for multi-dose prescriptions. These individual packages are labeled with the medication, day, date and time to be taken, with the objective of improving convenience while reducing confusion and the risk of medication errors. Thrifty White will even show the patient when he last took his medication.

These programs share a common objective — encouraging that’s no small accomplishment when put in context. The retailer has thus far enrolled about 16,700 patients in the Med Sync program. Those patients use an average of over four maintenance drugs. Thus, the program has succeeded in transferring some 900,000 maintenance prescriptions annually to the central-fill facilities. But the advantages both to Thrifty White and its patients are numerous.

• The process of central fill in freeing up pharmacists to provide more relevant health advice. According to Narveson: “We’ve significantly improved the healthy outcomes for our patients. We’ve provided pharmacy services and new opportunities to practice their profession, opportunities which didn’t exist five years ago. We know we’ve reduced and managed the patient’s overall health care cost mitigation for insurers, employers and Medicare/Medicaid significant dollars.”

Finally, says Thrifty White’s president, “Job satisfaction among pharmacists has dramatically improved. The ability to provide more relevant advice our programs have received and the opportunity to involve pharmacy interns from the North Dakota State University School of Pharmacy in the program resulted in half of last year’s graduates from that school applying for jobs at Thrifty White.”

The retailer’s medication adherence initiatives have combined to propel the 89-store drug chain to the front ranks of community pharmacy retailers. These initiatives have brought a new recognition of the possibilities and the potential to America’s oldest drug chain.

Rexall Pharma Plus

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“The flu immunization program is an example of collaboration between community pharmacy and government, resulting in improved access, healthier communities and overall health care cost mitigation,” he says.

According to the Public Health Agency of Canada, the flu affects 5% to 10% of Canadians every year. While the majority who become sick do recover, influenza annually leads to 30,000 hospitalizations and 4,900 to 8,000 deaths across the country.

Rexall Pharma Plus is offering flu shots in all of its stores in Ontario. The vaccines are available to anyone over age 5. Patients do not need an appointment.

Public Health Ontario is providing the chain with the vaccine.
Raising the Bar

Thrifty White Pharmacy has raised community pharmacy practice to a new level by filling most maintenance prescriptions at central-fill facilities in Fargo, N.D. (photos at left and below). The process frees in-store pharmacists to consult with patients about their medications. Besides filling some 60% of maintenance drugs at a central-fill facility, the retailer also robotically central-fills drugs for the area's long-term care facilities. Stores that can't support an on-premises pharmacist use a home-office pharmacist to monitor individual stores and prescriptions on a video screen and verify the accuracy of prescriptions and consult with patients on new medications via video conferencing (photo above right).
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Soul of industry resides in pharmacists

By David Pinto

Thifty White Pharmacy, an 89-store Minnesota-based drug chain with stores in six prairie states, is rewriting the book on the way community pharmacy is, or could be, practiced in America.

In a series of boldly conceived and flawlessly executed programs, all turning on a well-considered attempt to allow the pharmacist to consult with patients and manage their medication therapy, Thifty White has created a new pharmacy paradigm, one that at once simplifies the way prescriptions drugs are distributed to patients, increases the value of the pharmacist by encouraging him to do what he has been trained to do, and advances the often elusive objective of medication compliance. As a result, the program reduces the ultimate cost of health care by improving patient outcomes.

Details of the program can be found elsewhere in this issue. However, in its simplest terms, it turns on three axes:

• Filling maintenance drugs for the entire chain in a state-of-the-art, robotically driven central-fill facility in Fargo, N.D., that both increases and simplifies productivity and accuracy while freeing the in-store pharmacist for the more urgent, yet often neglected or underutilized, role of interacting with the patient.
• Offering customers a program that informs the patient ahead of time when his or her maintenence prescriptions will be available for pickup, then giving that patient the option of picking up the prescriptions at the store or having them delivered to the patient’s home or business address, either by hand or by mail.
• Developing a program wherein patients can pick up all their monthly prescriptions at once, at the same, patient-specified day each month.

These core components are supplemented by a variety of other services, all designed to increase efficiency, clarify the patient’s prescription drug regimen, and relieve the pharmacist of the burden of filling prescriptions, and so allow him to spend more time interacting with patients. As a result, medication compliance has been dramatically increased, to double the national average, as has the opportunity for pharmacists to monitor the health of their patients.

By now it’s old news in the medical profession that the failure to follow prescription drug regimes produces staggering consequences. One recent report concluded that “increasing the effectiveness of adherence interventions may have a far greater impact on the health of a population than any improvement in specific medical treat-ments.” Another study determined that “noncompliance is responsible for up to 26% of hospital admissions as well as 23% of nursing home admissions in our older population.”

Nor is it news that more than one patient in three in the United States does not take his medication as prescribed, or that nonadherence has been shown to result in some $300 billion each year in excess medical costs. Or that increased adherence can lead to healthier outcomes.

With studies routinely confirming these findings, the Thifty White program is a compelling example of the role pharmacy can, and should, play in reducing health care costs and improving outcomes. To that end, the Thifty White program has attracted both attention and praise from a variety of health care constituencies.

Yet the reality is that the Minnesota-based drug chain continues to fight a daily battle to convince the larger health care community that what’s good for pharmacy is even better for health care in this country. PBMs and other third-party providers have thus far largely ignored the success Thifty White has achieved and, even worse, many continue to discriminate against the drug chain in favor of larger but less perspicacious, less efficient and often less enlightened rivals. As a result, this innovative drug chain, one whose efforts should be lauded, emulated and fairly reimbursed, finds itself in a position of daily having to defend a program whose results need no further justification.

Meanwhile, pharmacy as a profession continues to languish in the backwaters of the health care community, tolerated as a necessary but unwelcome incursion on larger, more serious and more romantic health care components and thus reimbursed as a commodity service rather than an indispensable component whose efficiency and effectiveness can elevate the entire health care community.

In the end, then, the people at Thifty White who conceived, built and brilliantly continue to develop, advocate and extol this exemplary program should be congratulated for what they’ve done and recognized for what they believe, rather than questioned daily about the advantages of a program whose value is far beyond any dispute.

In short, Thifty White has proven what so many other community pharmacies prove daily: The soul of this industry continues to reside in those pharmacy practitioners who are most committed to advancing health care in America — and, by so doing, justify pharmacy’s place in the larger health care community.

The people at Thifty White should be congratulated for what they’ve done.