Sickle Cell Disease Chapter 4

**Sickle Cell Disease Series: How patients benefit from Atrium’s integrated health care team and specialty pharmacy service**

Sickle cell disease can cause a lifetime of financial burden to patients and their families. An inability to work, expensive medications and treatments can be overwhelming for patients.

Atrium Health works with patients, their medical insurance companies and drug providers to make treatment options more affordable and easier to access.

Through Atrium Health’s Specialty Pharmacy Services, pharmacists and pharmacy technicians work with patients to find affordable medications and alternative payment programs.

Atrium Health serves approximately 1.3 million patients in the greater Charlotte metro area alone. It is estimated that 3 percent of the general population requires specialty medications, like those needed for sickle cell disease treatment and management. Specialty medications usually involve extensive processing, with prior authorization and special formularies from insurance companies. They are typically high cost, and in the case of newer medications, the drug manufactures often do not provide payment assistance programs.

Working to find a solution to ease financial burden on patients, administrative burden on clinicians and improve patient outcome, Atrium Health created the Specialty Pharmacy Service. With the Specialty Pharmacy Service, on average, Atrium secures copay assistance up to 85 percent of patient copay versus industry average of 60 percent, with patients paying an average copy of $29 per prescription. Under the service, pharmacists and pharmacy technicians follow up with patients to determine payment eligibility.

“Our approach with Specialty Pharmacy Services, within a health system, is to really tackle a population of patients that need help,” said John Robicsek, assistant vice president, program development, pharmacy services at Atrium Health. “Working with our providers to identify patients that are going to be placed on certain medications that we have the ability to support with our services.”

Sickle cell disease patients’ medications can be expensive and complicated. And sickle cell patients are often in crisis, meaning they need access to begin their medication treatment plan as soon as possible. Atrium’s Specialty Pharmacy Service has an average 24 to 48-hour prescription fulfillment timeframe. Whereas an outside pharmacy could take a week, potentially delaying patient treatment.

“Having an internal pharmacy that works within our health system, we are able to deliver a more streamlined and transparent and accountable experience for our patients,” said Robicsek. “What's most important about having an internal specialty pharmacy department is the ability for us to be able to have our pharmacists and providers work side-by-side to identify patients who could benefit from medications. The pharmacy team makes sure that the medications can be affordable, tolerable and help patients so they can receive the outcomes that they expect and deserve.”

The patient care teams, from doctors and nurses to pharmacists, have access to electronic medical records. If a sickle cell patient were to have questions about a new medication, the pharmacist can look at his chart for potential side effects or drug interactions. Patients have reported better understanding of medications and compliance with the 24 hour a day, seven days a week Patient Management Program. Atrium’s integrated healthcare system has improved quality of care, patient experience and continuum of care.

*Teammate Spotlight*

*LaToya Washington is a pharmacy technician with Atrium Health. She acts as a patient liaison; when the physician’s order comes to her, she puts it in to be filled. If the prescription requires special authorization, Washington coordinates approval. Once an order is filled, her office coordinates medication delivery to the patient’s home, removing potential transportation barriers.*

*With sickle cell disease, patients are commonly in crisis. While new sickle cell disease drugs are on the market and work well for patients, they can be cost prohibitive and manufacturers don’t always offer payment assistance on newer products. Washington helps patients figure out payment options and insurance deductibles as not to delay treatment due to costs.*

 *“If a patient didn't have Atrium Health’s Specialty Pharmacy Services, if they went to an outside pharmacy and presented their prescription, it's either you can afford it or you can't,” said Washington. “With us, we delve a little bit more. We try to seek other avenues, reaching out to the doctors' offices, speaking with the nurses to see if there are other options. We want patients to focus on getting better and not having that financial burden as well.”*

Atrium Health’s Specialty Pharmacy Services sees approximately 25 percent of the sickle cell patient population in North Carolina. With the unique integrated dispensary pharmacy, patients exceed industry benchmarks for medication adherence and clinical outcomes. By helping reduce medicine costs, Atrium Health doesn’t stand to make more money. Using Specialty Pharmacy Services, patients can expect to see better outcomes.