How Retail Pharmacies Can Leverage Technology to Meet the Goals of the Triple Aim

Retail pharmacy is at the nexus of the Triple Aim. Pharmacy has an unprecedented opportunity to play a vital role in meeting the goals of healthcare's Triple Aim of lowering costs, bettering outcomes, and improving the patient experience. However, pharmacies face a host of challenges that strain resources and put downward pressure on bottom lines.

The post-Affordable Care Act transformation has upended traditional payment models and created millions of new healthcare consumers. Retail pharmacies are uniquely positioned to take advantage of this seismic shift from volume- to value-based care, due to their frequent access to patients and their historic experience serving retail customers. To emerge stronger than ever, retail pharmacies will need new strategies that maximize existing capacity and expand current capabilities. These strategies will require a new outlook and new technological solutions to support both increased volume and increased demands for one-on-one service delivery.

This white paper will explore the current business challenges for retail pharmacies, and their opportunities to overcome these hurdles while contributing meaningfully to the goals of the Triple Aim. The paper will describe pharmacies’ current deficits and explore the need for advanced communications tools to leverage pharmacies’ unique domain expertise both in medication adherence and in retail operations. Finally, the paper will outline the specific capabilities retail pharmacies need to bridge the gap to meet current and future healthcare challenges.

THE TRIPLE AIM AND MEDICATION ADHERENCE

The Triple Aim, first coined by the Institute for Healthcare Improvement,1 is comprised of the following three central goals for the healthcare industry: improving the patient experience of care (including quality and satisfaction), improving the health of populations, and reducing the per capita cost of healthcare.

Achieving the Triple Aim will require healthcare organizations to eliminate breakpoints in continuity of care, improve patient engagement, and increase communication among providers across the care continuum to optimize outcomes, increase efficiency, and prevent harm.

Pharmacy is uniquely positioned to contribute meaningfully towards achieving these goals due to its proximity to the patient, its unique visibility into costs paid by both payers and consumers, and its large volume of patients across multiple health systems and health plans. As an important nexus with a unique insight into patients’ whole health, across specialties and primary care, the pharmacy is best-positioned to solve an important challenge for the Triple Aim: medication non-adherence.

Simply put, when patients don’t take their medication properly, health costs balloon and patients’ health outcomes suffer. The result is more adverse events, including emergency room visits and hospital readmissions. Pharmacist are frequently called on to manage increasingly complex drug regimens; due to the rise in patients with multiple co-morbidities, and to the growth of complex specialty drugs.

Patients are often concerned about their drug therapy for a multitude of reasons and as such are less likely to take their medicine as prescribed, so pharmacies must take a leadership role in ongoing patient education. Patients who feel informed about their health and have a personal connection with pharmacy staff are more likely to adhere to their medication schedules.
Current Challenges for Retail Pharmacy

While retail pharmacies have long counseled customers on dosing schedules and potential drug interaction, the new demands of managing complex medications and complex chronic conditions are straining current resources. Pharmacies lack tools to efficiently triage patients according to the intensity of their service needs, while reducing administrative burdens without losing the personal pharmacist touch customers rely on.

Pharmacies face a number of challenges to success as they navigate the changing healthcare landscape. Here are three of the concerns for retail pharmacies:

1. **CONSOLIDATIONS**
   - Hospitals, healthcare systems, and even healthcare payers continue to merge at a fast clip. In 2015, nearly $400 billion in agreements were announced and expectations are higher for 2016. These consolidations can create gaps in continuity of care, as patients struggle to find a new in-network physician or decide to drive to a facility farther away to receive care. Pharmacies must work to establish one-on-one connections with patients to retain customers even when their doctors change. A recent Human Resources Institute consumer survey found that Americans are still willing to drive further to receive care from a well-known healthcare brand. Pharmacies must work to be considered a trusted brand.

2. **GROWING COSTS AND REGULATIONS**
   - Consumers often struggle to afford their medications. For instance, 17% of American adults have asked their doctors for cheaper prescriptions, according to a 2015 HRH “Money matters” consumer survey. Also, regulators and consumers are putting increasing pressure on pharmacies for more transparency on payments. For instance, Kmart paid $1.4 million to settle accusations of illegal coupon acceptance and prescription incentives – neither of which are allowed by Medicaid. Pharmacies must innovate to provide price transparency and find legitimate means for lowering patients’ drug costs.

3. **DELIVERING PERSONALIZED SERVICES**
   - Pharmacies must not simply maintain, but extend the level of personalized services, even as volumes grow. The best retail pharmacy chains are launching new ways to connect with patients around both acute and urgent care, and long-term chronic conditions. Some are also providing individualized metrics back to physicians and/or healthcare payers to guide future care.

   In order to overcome these challenges and others, pharmacies must demonstrate their unique value in helping to solve healthcare’s thorniest problems. Retail pharmacies who embrace their role in addressing the three pillars of the Triple Aim will see improvements in customer loyalty, growing opportunities for partnerships with payers and providers, and a positive impact on their bottom lines.
TRIPLE AIM PILLAR #1
Reducing the Per Capita Costs of Care

When it comes to U.S. healthcare costs, a small group of patients, often called “superutilizers”, accounts for a disproportionate share of healthcare dollars spent. This is due in part to the large number of hospital readmissions that superutilizers account for. For instance, according to a 2015 study, the average all-cause 30-day readmission rate was four to eight times higher for superutilizers than for other patients. Among patients under 65, superutilizers accounted for more than half of all 30-day readmissions.\(^5\)

Targeting superutilizers, who often have multiple co-morbid physical and/or mental health conditions, is an important component of strategies to meet the Triple Aim goal of reducing the per capita costs of care. Common conditions of superutilizers include complex chronic diseases such as diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and schizophrenia. These conditions require effective medication monitoring and advanced adherence strategies that take into account the patient’s other conditions, plus any demographic or socio-economic factors that may get in the way of a patient staying on therapy and out of the hospital.

The pharmacy has a leading role to play to help superutilizers anticipate obstacles to adherence and engage those who may feel marginalized by their health status. Pharmacies’ efforts to manage these complex patients need additional robust technological support in order to:

1. Identify patients who need interventions
2. Reduce breakpoints in care transitions
3. Streamline communications with both patients and providers

Pharmacies also have an important role to play in reducing health costs derived from patients taking the wrong medications. As drug prices grow—a recent Wells Fargo claims survey put drug price growth at 13.9 percent for 2017—\(^6\) it is more important than ever for pharmacies to partner with patients, providers, and payers to match the right patient with the right medicine. Pharmacies, through ongoing communication with patients, can help identify which patients are on ineffective treatments, and switch them to alternatives that will improve health outcomes – eliminating wasteful spending and lowering healthcare costs for those patients downstream.

TRIPLE AIM PILLAR #2
Improving the Patient Experience

The healthcare sector has a long distance to travel to improve the patient experience. Patient experience is the sum of interactions throughout the patient journey, from awareness and attraction, through purchase, care, retention, and advocacy. It is the patient’s perceptions and related feelings caused by the one-off and cumulative effect of interactions with a pharmacy’s employees, systems channels, or products. The implications of patient experience on overall business success cannot be understated.

Too many healthcare institutions are known best for their long phone wait times, their byzantine maze of departments to navigate, and their failure to provide adequate self-service to those patients who prefer it.

In addition, as patients pay more out of pocket for their healthcare, healthcare organizations must do more to engage patients as true partners in their own care. This means providing increased services to patients both during and between appointments with healthcare providers.

Healthcare providers often struggle to provide adequate time for education and communication with patients during appointments due to higher patient volume since the expansion of health insurance under the Affordable Care Act. Many providers have limited means to reach out to patients between appointments, beyond appointment reminders, or sporadic public health outreach, such as for flu vaccines or pediatric immunizations.

Healthcare providers looking to improve the patient experience are also challenged by the transformation of patients into healthcare consumers. This is driven in part by higher patient share of costs through co-pays, coinsurance, and deductibles. It is also the result of the new multi-channel experience that consumers now expect in other industries, including financial institutions, and cable/telephone/internet providers.

Pharmacies are a natural locus for improving the patient experience, because visits to the pharmacy greatly outnumber visits to the doctor. In 2015, pharmacy sales exceeded $364.1 billion\(^7\) across 67,000+ stores in North America, and in a given week, more than 275 million\(^8\) people visit a retail pharmacy in the US. Recently, Medicaid expanded the number of prescriptions covered by nearly 17%, accounting for 70% of growth in the number of prescriptions filled at retail pharmacies.

The other reason retail pharmacies have great potential for meeting patient experience goals is that the sector is rooted in the retail experience in a way that healthcare providers and health plans are not. But until now, most pharmacies have not combined their unique vantage point on patients’ overall health combined with their long history as retailers.

Pharmacies that effectively connect interactions throughout the patient journey, predict behavior, and deliver a perpetually better experience will be strategically positioned to evolve with their patients as consumers – promoting efficiency, heightening profitability, maximizing meaningful engagement, and winning loyal advocacy. Evolving to manage the customer experience will be critical.
TRIPLE AIM PILLAR #3
Improving the Health of Populations

Population health management (PHM) has become the focus of employers and healthcare systems concerned about impending changes in reimbursement and increasing challenges in delivering quality care, all while achieving patient satisfaction. PHM entails continuous care of the entire patient population. PHM must account for the population in its entirety and exhibit functionality to not only managing chronic conditions, but deliver strategic functionality around prevention and wellness. It requires a solution that automates routine tasks, facilitates communications, and maximizes the effectiveness of care teams.

PHM requires that care be patient-centered, proactive, coordinated, continuous, and comprehensive. Patient engagement is as important as provider interventions in improving population health and in determining health outcomes. The more engaged patients are in managing their own care and in modifying their health behavior, the more likely they are to remain healthy or to improve their health.

PHM fundamentally changes the way that a healthcare organization approaches the delivery of care. Improving population health presents a major cultural, operational, and financial shift across a broad range of stakeholders and their associated goals.10

Pharmacy is extremely well-positioned to gather information on patient populations across disease states, across payers, and across healthcare providers and hospital systems. But transforming that information into actionable intelligence to benefit the health status of a community will require better communication and reporting tools that can help pharmacies connect with patients, providers, and payers.

Many population health programs use benchmarks related to common diseases, such as diabetes and heart disease, to measure effectiveness in meeting goals. Recording and reporting such benchmarks requires ongoing patient engagement outside of periodic primary care or specialty visits.

Patients may visit several different doctors and health systems, but likely use a single pharmacy for many years. Pharmacists can play a key role in improving continuity of care as healthcare payment models shift from fee-for-service to value-based reimbursement. Pharmacists can provide more one-on-one consultations and informational sessions with patients.

Pharmacies are ramping up their population health initiatives with programs beyond flu shots. They may offer coaching for a variety of conditions, including diabetes management and post-heart surgery patients.

Pharmacists’ increasing commitment to population health strategies elevates their position as health provider “extenders” that play a more direct role in patients’ care. A recent survey by Human Resources Institute found that three quarters of consumers surveyed said they were open to healthcare provider “extenders”, such as nurse practitioners and pharmacists, performing health services. Post-Affordable Care Act, pharmacists can help to fill the void caused by increased wait times for doctors’ appointments.

Pharmacies prepared to provide patients with a growing array of primary care services will flourish. But the prospect of scaling these programs is daunting for pharmacists already stretched by growing patient volumes. As one-on-one and group coaching sessions proliferate, pharmacies must, in tandem, deploy strategies to automate some routine pharmacist functions. Automation can help pharmacies standardize interactions with patients at low risk for medication non-adherence, for easier data capture and reporting. Pharmacies need solutions that can relieve rote administrative burdens on pharmacists, so they can participate in population health programs that can both improve outcomes and lower costs.

HOW PHARMACISTS CAN DEPLOY TECHNOLOGY TO MEET THE TRIPLE AIM

Jason, a pharmacist at a large retail pharmacy, wants to engage his patient, Pam, a 56-year-old recently diagnosed with high blood pressure. Pam has been identified by the pharmacy’s system as relatively non-compliant on her previous medications. Jason’s goals are to engage Pam on the importance of taking her medications as directed and to help her manage any potential side effects or other hurdles to medication adherence.

Leveraging automated communications, Jason first sends Pam an “order ready” notification. Since this medication is new, Jason can choose a medication adherence program tailored to a particular class of therapeutics. This program sends Pam an automated text message detailing dosing and other information on the new drug. Next, Pam will receive a detailed text message 24 hours after picking up her medication. Five days later, Pam will receive an automated IVR asking her to take a short survey to reveal any side effects or medication issues. If Pam is found to be non-compliant, the platform will alert Jason to follow up. Jason can even send Pam a text right from his desktop computer, reminding her to take her pill with food, for instance. If the survey shows Pam is compliant, no follow up is needed. Pam will receive an automated message at 25 days to reassess her compliance and remind her to refill her medication.

Jason now has the needed capacity to automate communications for compliant patients and the power to customize communications for non-compliant patients, including channel of choice (phone, text, email, web, or medical device) and frequency.
COMMUNICATIONS’ ROLE IN PATIENT ENGAGEMENT

Better medication adherence is an essential building block of any healthcare strategy focused on addressing the Triple Aim. Patients that take their medications properly have better healthcare outcomes and cost the system far less than patients who are non-adherent. Poor medication adherence also degrades the patient experience because these patients experience more symptoms and may end up back in the hospital.

The key to improving medication adherence is to engage patients between the “Order Ready” and the “Refill Reminder” on an ongoing basis in order to educate patients on the proper adherence to their regimens and to stand by them to support them through any obstacles they may encounter sticking to their dosing schedules.

While it’s clear that engaged patients are healthier patients, many pharmacies don’t have the tools and processes in place to align patient communication with pharmacy workflow or MTM services, let alone to drive consistent communication across the continuum of care. As a result, patient engagement is often disjointed, reactive, and expensive.

Retail pharmacies should seek out communications tools that make it easier for pharmacists to connect with patients at a variety of touchpoints along their medication adherence journey. These strategies need to be:

- Proactive
- Efficient
- Consistent
- Patient-centered

Automating some of these touchpoints will help free up pharmacist resources to enable them to engage one-on-one with patients that require greater human touch intensity. This balance between empathetic automation and the pharmacist touch can help pharmacists increase connections with patients even while pharmacy volumes continue to grow.

By leveraging new communications solutions, retail pharmacies can increase capacity without adding staff, drive more timely and effective engagement during transitions of care, and create healthier populations through proactive engagement regarding prevention and wellness.

Effective communications approaches allow retail pharmacies to tailor interventions to specific disease states or wellness objectives over time. The best solutions also enable retail pharmacies to customize strategies to each patient’s willingness and ability to engage with automated communications. They deliver interactive, multichannel options that allow pharmacies to deliver the right message at the right time via the patient’s channel of choice.

The best new solutions allow pharmacists to easily distinguish those patients that are adhering to their medications and those who may require a more proactive approach to stay on therapy. The solution should then guide pharmacists through choosing customized approaches to these interventions.

For patients who are at low risk for medication non-adherence, retail pharmacies can reduce administrative effort by scheduling and automating routine communications — beyond just refill reminders. Pharmacists should also have a capability to easily view the nature and frequency of communications with each patient, so they can meet the patient where they are at in their medication journey and eliminate the need for the patient to repeat their history.

Communications solutions should also aid pharmacies that are engaged in partnerships with providers and/or healthcare payers to deliver MTM services. These approaches should streamline reporting by automatically updating the patient record with information gathered during automated communication interventions.
CONCLUSION
As the healthcare system struggles to meet the cost and quality goals of the Triple Aim, the retail pharmacy is uniquely positioned to be an increasingly vital partner in this quest. Pharmacies have the opportunity to be the healthcare nexus for patients, in a healthcare ecosystem that can feel impersonal and fragmented. Retail pharmacies have the power to improve care coordination, reduce hospital readmissions, and improve transitions of care.

But pharmacies must find a cost-effective means of contending with both increasing patient volume and a broadening array of service offerings. Leveraging new communications technologies can ease routine administrative tasks for pharmacists, help identify the patients at greatest risk for non-adherence, simplify reporting, and leverage analytics to improve care. By offloading rote tasks, pharmacists will have more capacity to connect with patients in meaningful ways.

Retail pharmacies must identify technology partners that can help them make the transition to automation in a way that best serves both the pharmacy and its customers, and will continue to support the business as it grows.

References
1. http://content.healthaffairs.org/content/27/3/759.long

About West Healthcare
West helps healthcare providers, payers, employers, pharmacy organizations, and ACOs optimize communications, drive better patient activation, and lower the overall cost of delivering care. Whether you want to increase immunization and screening rates, reduce hospital readmissions for patients with chronic disease, or improve the patient experience and operational efficiency in your patient access centers, the West Engagement Center™ is the communication linchpin for engaging and activating patient populations across the entire care continuum.

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