

# PHARMACY INTERVENTION PROGRAMS TACKLE drug costs & productivity ISSUES

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**B**ehavioral health care is a major public health concern, impacting quality of life for millions of individuals. When left untreated, it can place an enormous economic burden on American businesses with increased rates of absenteeism, workplace injuries and reduction of productivity. Medical and pharmaceutical costs associated with the improper care of behavioral health issues, such as depression and psychotic disorders, are spiraling out of control.

Unfortunately, a large number of employees who have a diagnosable mental illness will turn to their general practitioner (GP) in lieu of a mental or behavioral health expert for treatment. Most GPs lack the training and expertise to properly diagnose and treat behavioral health issues. As a result, patients are often misdiagnosed; given

inadequate treatment, such as prescribing medication when none is needed or prescribing the wrong class of medication; and not referred to specialists who are better suited to handle these types of issues.

## QUICK LOOK

- ➔ By working with employees and their general practitioners, EAP case managers can ensure effective referrals, monitor treatment compliance, advise on health-plan coverage and provide counseling to employees in a crisis.
- ➔ An EAP pharmacy intervention program can save a client organization significantly by reducing unnecessary pharmacy and medical claims that can drive up health-care costs.
- ➔ More psychotropic medications are being prescribed by general practitioners or other health-care providers who lack the expertise to properly diagnose or treat behavioral health issues.



As drug costs continue to rise even faster than overall medical costs, employers need to find new and effective ways to manage them. An employee-assistance-program-based pharmacy intervention program is uniquely qualified to handle these problems by working with employees and their doctor to develop a course of action that will effectively address the employee's behavioral health issues. The employee assistance program (EAP) case manager can also assist employees in locating a specialist, such as a therapist or psychiatrist, monitor their compliance with treatment and provide behavioral health counseling.

Specifically, an EAP-based pharmacy intervention program:

- Educates members who were prescribed a psychotropic medication in a general medical setting
- Works with members and their general practitioners to develop a course of action that is appropriate for their behavioral health issues
- Provides behavioral health counseling to members who are taking psychotropic medications to augment their therapy and reduce relapse
- Reduces pharmacy costs and can increase productivity for members and client organizations
- Increases awareness and use of EAPs.

## Background

When evaluating the need for a pharmacy intervention program, consider the following:

- In a study funded by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) reported in the *Archives of General Psychiatry* (2007), 53 percent of U.S. adults suffered from mental or physical conditions that resulted in disability, each averaging about 32 days of disability per year or 1.3 billion disability days just for mental health conditions.

- Mental illness is also estimated to be the top illness-causing disability in the United States. The Work Loss Data Institute reports that there has been a 300-percent increase in mental health-related Social Security disability claims during the past decade.
- Between 1995 and 2002, the most recent year for which statistics are available, the use of antidepressant and psychotropic medications rose 48 percent, according to the Centers for Disease Control.
- In 2007, U.S. adults spent more money on antidepressants and other psychiatric drugs than any other drug category, according to Medco. Why the rise? While there is no specific cause, several factors come into play. Some experts point to the drug companies, which are increasingly marketing their antidepressants and other psychotropic medications directly to consumers. These consumers then turn to their doctors for a prescription, not knowing what other resources are available.

Many attribute at least part of the surge in antidepressant use to the rate at which antidepressants are prescribed by doctors outside of the mental health field. In fact, of the prescriptions filled in 2005 (not including refills), less than one-third (29 percent) were prescribed by psychiatrists, according to the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. Of the remainder, the majority were written by general practitioners (23 percent), family practitioners (21 percent) and internal medicine specialists (10 percent). In recent years, Medco has reported that five out of six users of psychotropic medications had them prescribed by general practitioners.

GPs have become the first line of intervention for most patients with anxiety and depression, as these patients are in the habit of going to their GP for a wide range of complaints.

There are several problems with using a GP to treat depression issues, including the following:

- Despite a GP's best intentions, the majority are not adequately trained to practice behavioral health, as many have no formal training beyond the material marketed with the medication.

## MOST GENERAL PRACTITIONERS ARE NOT QUALIFIED to recognize dependency-related issues associated with the use of anxiolytics.

- GPs sometimes prescribe medication as the only treatment when it may not be indicated. In a study by DeRu-beis, et al (2005) on the efficacy of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and antidepressant medication, CBT was found to be just as effective in treating moderate and severe depression as medication, and can increase the effectiveness of medications when combined. Similar studies into the treatment of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and anxiety-related disorders have yielded similar results.
- Most general practitioners are not qualified to recognize dependency-related issues associated with the use of anxiolytics, such as Xanax, Klonopin and valium; and stimulants, such as Ritalin and Adderall. These issues lead to the higher use of emergency room and doctor's visits, which ultimately drive up health-care

premiums and disability costs, and impede productivity via increased absenteeism and presenteeism.

Because every person who suffers from behavioral health disorders is different, and the depression, stress or anxiety people experience has varying causes, there is no effective "one-size-fits-all, take-a-pill" treatment.

People need individual help to identify the most effective treatment for their specific mental health issues, whether it's counseling only, medication management through a psychiatrist or both. This is where an EAP-based pharmacy intervention program comes

into play. The potential cost savings to the employer can be significant when considering the cost of the medications, which can range from \$2 to \$8 or more per pill; emergency room visits, which average about \$560 per visit; and the inherent impact on member productivity.

### Programs in Action

EAP use has been shown to greatly help companies who have employees struggling with depression. According to research from the Department of Health and Human Services (2002), employers with EAPs average 21-percent lower absentee rates and 14-percent higher productivity rates.

To illustrate how the EAP can be helpful, consider the case of "Sandy," a 19-year-old daughter of an employee of a retail company. The mother called the EAP after Sandy went to the emergency room due to poor impulse

control and aggressive behaviors that put her and others at risk. At the time, Sandy's GP prescribed for her Adderall (\$3/pill), Lexapro (\$2.65/pill) and Ambien (\$5/pill). When the mother contacted the EAP, her work productivity was suffering, and she was missing work frequently to deal with her daughter's problems. The mother told the case manager Sandy was suffering from depression and ADHD, the latter of which was diagnosed by the GP two years ago. Sandy had been under the GP's care since then and had been on other medications before her current course of action. After a thorough assessment by the EAP case manager, who is trained in the practice of psychopharmacotherapy, Sandy was referred to a therapist as well as a psychiatrist and diagnosed with bipolar disorder. The psychiatrist replaced her meds with Lamictal (\$2/pill), and after follow-up, Sandy's behaviors improved, and she was able to return to school. With the help of the therapist, she is able to manage her stress more effectively. Since Sandy was doing better, the mother was able to focus on work and her absenteeism was no longer an issue.

In this case, the EAP:

- Educated the mother and Sandy on the medications prescribed, and the disorders the medications are used to treat, as well as linked the mother with educational material to better educate them on the relevant mental health disorders that were available through the EAP Web site.
- Worked with the GP, once a release of information was obtained, to identify an appropriate course of action and resources available for Sandy to use, and to encourage the GP to monitor Sandy's compliance with treatment.
- Assisted the mother and Sandy in accessing their mental health benefits, and assisted them in locating a

- psychiatrist qualified to address her needs.
- Located a mental health therapist who was able to provide individual and family therapy.
  - Provided follow-up to Sandy to ensure that she was remaining treatment compliant.
  - Helped the mother avoid any further problems at work by eliminating absenteeism and improving her work productivity.
  - Provided a savings to the employer with decreased use in medications (more than \$10 for more than one medication per day to \$2/pill), and reduced the likelihood of any more

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ER visits (\$800) due to mental health issues. The EAP was also able to reduce or eliminate the potential for inpatient hospital services (\$1,400/day), which would have been indicated if Sandy continued with the GP's treatment. In another case illustrating the cost-saving benefits of an EAP pharmacy intervention program, "Brad," a 35-year-old manager for a manufacturing company, was identified for intervention after the EAP analyzed the company's pharmaceutical prescription data. The identification and outreach was triggered by his


prescription of psychotropic medication, Zoloft (\$2.60/pill) and Ambien (\$5/pill), by a general practitioner. Once a comprehensive assessment was completed by the EAP case manager, it was determined that Brad was experiencing mild depression due to recent job relocation. Brad was having minor sleep and appetite disturbances and problems with concentration; there was minimal impact on work; and minimal impact on his family, who were extremely supportive. Brad reported "just feeling stressed" as a result of moving to a new city and locating child-care providers. The GP's "medication-only" course of action involved Brad taking Zoloft and Ambien to manage the symptoms, and no referral was given for counseling. After obtaining permission from Brad to speak with his doctor, the EAP case manager worked with the GP and with Brad to develop a course of action that involved discontinuing the medication and a referral to an EAP counselor who helped Brad manage the stress of moving to a new city. In addition, Brad was referred to the EAP's work-life program, which provided him with referrals for child care. During a routine follow-up by the EAP case manager, Brad reported significant improvements with his sleep and appetite, and his depression had been alleviated.

In this case the EAP was able to:

- Provide a cost savings to the employee by eliminating the need for medications.

- Provide a cost savings to the employer with the elimination of pharmaceutical claims and by containing cost within the EAP, thereby eliminating unnecessary medical claims.
- Increase the employee's awareness of the services provided by the EAP through the use of EAP counselors and work-life programs to address more immediate concerns.

**Conclusion**

As more people are diagnosed with mental-health-related issues, an EAP-based pharmacy program can help employers manage medication costs, while continuing to improve employees' health and work performance. 

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