

Specialty drugs are a category of medications used to treat relatively rare conditions like multiple sclerosis, rheumatoid arthritis or Hepatitis C. Our members being treated with these medications typically need a much higher level of end-to-end care management compared to more common conditions such as high cholesterol or blood pressure.

To that end many health plans, including Priority Health, engage a limited number of specialty pharmacies to facilitate the delivery of this higher level of member care.

For example, when started on a specialty medication, our designated specialty pharmacy conducts a health assessment with the member, specific to that member's particular condition.

Every month the member is contacted to arrange delivery of the next month supply. In addition, during that contact, other assessments are made. Questions are asked such as:

- Are you experiencing any new or unexpected side effects? If so, the specialty pharmacy has pharmacists and nurses on hand, trained in these specialty areas, to address these issues, and are able to escalate to the member's physician if necessary. This type of interaction, on a regular basis, can also increase compliance – without it, a member may just discontinue their medication, which could lead to a poor clinical outcome. In fact data supports that medication adherence – taking your medication regularly – is much higher through specialty pharmacy distribution.

The specialty pharmacy also has an integrated relationship with the health plan care management and behavioral health areas. We've had an instance where one of these contacts revealed a severely depressed multiple sclerosis member, who was triaged to our behavioral health professionals for appropriate follow-up.

Another common trait of specialty medications is price – these medications very often cost 5-10 thousand dollars a month, or even higher. Many of us have high deductible health plans, but we can't allow the price to make these medications unaffordable to our members. Our specialty pharmacy currently staffs 18 full-time employees whose sole function is to identify patient copay-assistance programs, to help offset these high costs. In fact, up to half of our members receive some type of assistance through these programs.

Lastly, pharmaceutical manufacturers sometimes limit the distribution of their products to a select number of specialty pharmacies, to ensure that members who are prescribed their medications have access to some of the benefits outlined above.

The bottom line is, although many pharmacies can order and dispense some of these medications, specialty should not be treated like a common commodity. Health plans must retain the ability to work with selected specialty pharmacy providers that are able to deliver the holistic care that our members need and deserve.