

Successful pharmacies rely on RMS

Mandate to reduce readmissions spurs a new outpatient pharmacy model and mobile transaction system at Alabama's second largest hospital

How quickly a mission can be changed to suit the times. At the 941-bed Huntsville Hospital in Huntsville, Alabama, the Outpatient Pharmacy has a dramatically different purpose and rising role from just a few months ago.

What was a high-volume outpatient pharmacy serving employees and their dependents – to the tune of 300+ prescriptions and refills a day – has launched a 2013 initiative to offer and encourage the filling of patients' discharge prescriptions. The hospital had not offered this service before. To accommodate this pharmacy growth with minimal addition of staff, and to enhance patient and family convenience, the pharmacy now takes its transaction technology directly to patients' rooms, using EvolutionPOS™ portable point-of-sale devices from Retail Management Solutions (RMS).



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Significant move for a leading medical center

Hospitals are beginning to experience Medicare penalties for readmissions within 30 days, and many are adding systemic approaches to assure the continued success of discharged patients, particularly those who may be at highest risk for recurrence and relapse.

As Alabama's second largest hospital, Huntsville Hospital is the major referral medical center and trauma center for patients throughout the Tennessee Valley. It is community owned and governed by a city Health Care Authority, and is the nation's sixth largest publicly owned hospital system. The medical center also operates Huntsville Hospital for Women & Children and Madison Hospital, and has multiple affiliates in the region.

Lessons learned about medication continuity

"In part, the Medicare readmission penalties moved us to offering all patients the ability to take home the first fill of their prescriptions," explains Brad Gilchrist, PharmD, supervisor of the Outpatient Pharmacy. "But we consider it equally important to assure uninterrupted continuity of medication, which is certainly the best practice."

"For some of the most sensitive diagnoses and procedures, we are gaining a much better understanding of the impact of having discharge medications go home with the patients. The first step in medication compliance is having the meds at hand."

Gilchrist explains a typical, recurring case for which discharge medications can provide a quality-of-life difference for the patient as well as reducing the risk of readmission.

"Consider heart failure patients, who typically leave with many medicines and a new, rigorous diet. For some, pretty much anything thrown off in their regimen can cause them to be readmitted to the hospital."

When they leave the hospital with just a paper prescription in hand, it may be filled the same day in the community. But delay is likely.

"Consider this example," Gilchrist continues. "Certain blood thinners require preauthorization from some health plans. If we have the chance to serve that patient before they leave the hospital, we bill the claim before they leave. If the insurance requires prior authorization, we simply page the doctor or nurse practitioner, so they can immediately justify or change the prescription, if necessary."

"This efficiency can save the patient from waiting days for medication. If the authorization process spanned a weekend, it could result in as much as five days without the blood thinner, which raises the risk of causing a stent blockage. It's simply careful practice to save them that avoidable heart attack."

"We are optimistic this discharge prescription service will also ultimately benefit the patient satisfaction scores, a helpful advantage," Gilchrist adds.

Staffing and procedures

Filling discharge orders began in January and is being phased in by the hospital unit, expected to be housewide, covering 35 units, before mid-year.

The Huntsville Hospital Outpatient Pharmacy is staffed by three full-time and one part-time pharmacists, three technicians who work mainly in the pharmacy, and another four technicians who work on the floors. The latter are "runners" who talk with patients, gather prescriptions and return to the patient rooms for check-out.

When patients are admitted, they are asked whether they would like to use outpatient prescription dispensing, with the explanation that it saves time and provides convenience, at prices comparable to a community pharmacy. Once discharge orders are written, the nursing unit pages the Outpatient Pharmacy with notice that the patient is an

Huntsville Hospital Outpatient Pharmacy Customer Solution Case Study

More independent pharmacists choose RMS Point-of-Sale systems than any other.



impending discharge. The assigned pharmacy technician speaks with the patient to verify the hospital dispensing. Then the tech goes to the patient chart to get the handwritten prescriptions. The hospital, by the way, has the capability for computerized physician ordering, but it is not yet widely used.

Taking portable pharmacy terminals to patient rooms

Several information systems are employed in the Outpatient Pharmacy. The dispensing system is McKesson PharmaServe. It interfaces with a PharmASSIST Symphony Workflow system by Innovation. Dispensing automation includes an Innovation Eyecon pill counter and an RXSafe supply storage system, both of which enhance accuracy.

In preparation for its 2013 transition, the pharmacy added the RMS Star-Lite point-of-sale system, consisting of a server, administrative workstation, two touch-screen cash registers and four EvolutionPOS handheld devices.



When the technician returns to the patient's room with the filled discharge prescriptions, the EvolutionPOS is first used to verify that all prescriptions have been provided. Payment cards, including flexible spending account (FSA) cards are scanned directly into the terminal, which provides immediate authorization securely across the hospital's Wi-Fi network, and the prescription and credit card signature are captured. The EvolutionPOS immediately prints the patient receipt.

In Alabama, pharmacies are required to offer pharmacist counseling, so the Huntsville technicians determine whether a patient wishes pharmacist counsel. If so, a pharmacist is sent to the room. Counseling notes and pharmacist's initials can also be recorded on the EvolutionPOS device.

Because EvolutionPOS is a fully functional cash register, taking all payment types, these handheld transaction terminals have also proven useful at the Outpatient Pharmacy. There they are regularly used for "line busting" traffic relief during the late-afternoon rush of employees picking up prescriptions.

Favorable results are emerging

The top question, of course, is how many outpatient prescriptions are being filled under this new offering?

Less than three months into the transition, Gilchrist says it's premature to draw conclusions, but preliminary data is encouraging. "Last week, our Outpatient Pharmacy volume was up 20% from the same week a year earlier, and we're only doing this in a third of the hospital so far." Half the increase was employee volume, the other half owed to discharge prescriptions. By third quarter, he expects there will be data reflecting impact on readmissions.

"Further," he notes, "We have just received approval for state Medicaid, which should constitute a good part of the volume."

Perhaps surprisingly, community pharmacists have little opposition to the hospital's new offering. "They understand that we are sending patients home to be immediately healthier, by ensuring continuity of medication," Gilchrist says.

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