

DRUG STORE NEWS

specialty pharmacy

The source for business insights, analysis and perspective

PREMIER
ISSUE
FALL 2009

INSIDE THE ECONOMICS OF SPECIALTY RX

Profiles in operation:
COMM CARE

Home infusion
converges with
convenient care



For the latest up-to-the-minute news updates,
visit www.drugstorenews.com/specialtypharmacy

Produced in
association with
ARMADA
Health Care

Commcare blends specialty pharmacy with long-term, high-touch patient care

By Jim Frederick

Serving the specialty pharmacy needs of patients with HIV, cancer and other serious chronic conditions is a job for specialists. It requires pharmacists, technicians and patient care advocates dedicated to hands-on and frequent contact with those patients, and a staff able to navigate the complexities of prior authorization procedures, daunting insurance hurdles, patient compliance, disease management and sometimes staggering drug-therapy costs.

One company that has mastered those challenges is Commcare, a high-volume,

concentrated on oral medications, and on trying to take care of the whole patient — not just the HIV drugs, but trying to manage the whole patient and his or her other medications.”

That holistic approach to patient care and outcomes management has taken deep root at the company in the ensuing years. Over that same period, the specialty pharmaceutical market also exploded as the biotechnology revolution began to transform pharmaceutical research and development.

The rise of specialty and biotech medi-

B and C, organ transplant treatment, rheumatoid arthritis and multiple sclerosis, among other disease states. They work directly with patients, physicians, health plans and payers to improve outcomes and manage the high costs of treatment.

To help manage that process, Commcare employs five “patient navigators,” who work with patients and payers for successful therapeutic outcomes. Those navigators, explained Commcare CEO Nick Saraniti, function as hands-on patient advocates.

“They’re responsible for seeing the process from start to finish, so we have one dedicated person in charge of that patient from the moment we intake them until they’re done with their therapy,” Saraniti told *Specialty Pharmacy* during a tour of Commcare’s Fort Lauderdale facility on July 8. “They’re helping the patient understand their insurance, their co-pays, their therapy — and our process and how it works.”

The patient navigators also help patients through the difficult questions they might have about their complicated drug therapies. Questions such as, “Is this something I’m going to take the rest of my life?” Or, “Are we going to cycle it until I get better?” “If it fails, what are we going to do?” according to Saraniti.

“If you’ve never been on the other side of health care, then God bless you,” he added. “But if you have? I tell my employees all the time, ‘We don’t ever want our patients to feel like we have felt when we were on the other side of health care.’”

Some health professionals, he added, “give you zero information, and they talk to you like you’re an idiot. Or you get conflicting information from different sources — and none of them talk to each other. We

“[After 1996,] we concentrated on oral medications, and on trying to take care of the whole patient ...”

>>>Sal Saraniti, co-founder,
chief pharmacy officer Commcare

high-service, \$100 million specialty pharmacy based in south Florida and directly serving patients in the Southeast. The company operates out of three heavily staffed pharmacies, including its high-volume flagship dispensing and counseling center in Fort Lauderdale and smaller pharmacies in Miami and West Palm Beach.

Commcare began in 1996 “as an infusion pharmacy that catered to HIV patients” before the advent of oral medications to treat the condition, explained company co-founder and chief pharmacy officer Sal Saraniti. “That changed very quickly in ’96 when the oral dosages came on board, and we moved away from infusion almost completely. We

cations demanded a far more hands-on approach to patient compliance, dosage regimens, prior authorization of expensive medication therapy and patient outcomes management. Commcare’s practitioners, already adept at managing the daily condition and drug regimens of HIV patients, were ahead of the curve and able to quickly evolve with the rapidly expanding specialty pharmacy market.

On its Web site, the company now bills itself as “a specialty pharmacy dedicated to developing creative, high-touch, patient-centric programs that deliver measurable improvements in the wellness of our patients.” Its pharmacists and patient care specialists provide disease state management services in HIV, oncology, hepatitis

don't ever want our patients to leave here feeling that way."

Commcare's pharmacy business is almost entirely driven by referrals of patients from local physicians, hospitals and other health providers. "It's a referral-based business, and to generate referrals, we use outside service representatives," said the company's chief executive. Those local service providers, he added, work full-time for Commcare in the field, and are directed in part by the five patient navigators who work out of the Fort Lauderdale facility.

"We call them service representatives and not sales reps, because that's what we expect them to do," Saraniti explained.

"Obviously, sales is a big portion of their responsibility, but their primary responsibility

Continued on page 28

Commcare, headed by CEO Nick Saraniti, is a high-volume, high-service, \$100 million specialty pharmacy based in south Florida.

Right: Commcare's Sal Saraniti, co-founder and chief pharmacy officer; Nick Saraniti, CEO; and Richard Dougherty, CFO



Left: Commcare's hands-on, holistic approach with patients calls for highly skilled, qualified individuals such as infusion technician Nilo Espinoza, pictured in the company's cold room.

Continued from page 27

is service — and enabling communication between the patient, physician, case manager and us.”

In addition, the outside service reps “put a face on our business locally,” Saraniti pointed out. “So in Jacksonville, for instance, where we have no physical location, there’s a person there a patient or a doctor can talk to.”

The service reps also assist in filling out “very complicated prior-authorization paperwork” for patients, or “a REMS [risk mitigation or risk management] program on the drug that the physician doesn’t understand,” said Saraniti.

“It could be something as simple as a pregnancy test. Or it could be ... a process in place with a patient registry, or lab results. It gets confusing to the docs on what they need to do to prescribe the drug,” added Saraniti. With the interven-

tion of service reps employed by Commcare, he said, “We’ll have someone there who can physically walk them through the process, or pick up the lab [results], or go in and ask them to finish the PA [prior-authorization process].”

As a result, the service people help expedite the process and speed the drug to the patient, he said. “We’ve found that it doesn’t really matter how good our relationship with the doctor is: If we call on the phone and fax them to [prescribe the drug], it’s going to take longer. The nurse writes it on a Post-it note, it gets stuck on her stack. She’ll do it, but it may take a couple of days.”

“If your doctor just diagnosed you with brain cancer, you probably don’t want to wait four more days to start your medication.”

Critical to the process are the five full-time patient navigators at the central

facility. Much of their time is spent dealing with insurance and copay hurdles on behalf of Commcare’s patients.

It’s a time-consuming and often demanding job, and it’s one of the challenges that make the specialty pharmacy arena a more complicated process than traditional pharmaceutical dispensing. “A doctor writes a prescription for a drug that’s \$1,000 a capsule: The first thing your insurance is going to do is deny it,” Saraniti said simply. “If you’re in a retail setting, the pharmacist is going to hand it back to you and tell you to call your insurance company, or maybe add it to a stack to do later. Here, that never happens. The first thing we’re going to do is call the patient and the doctor’s office. The patient navigator will walk them through the prior-authorization process ... and complete as much of the paperwork as they possibly can and send it back to the physician’s office to approve.”

“We do that because in today’s managed-care world, there are so many barriers in place. It’s so time-consuming for a nurse in the office to have to do some of those things ... we’re giving the physician back some of that time,” he said.

Even after approval is given for prescribing the drug, Commcare’s

Continued on page 35



Continued from page 28

patient navigators will keep the insurance companies, physicians and patients in the loop and “constantly track” the process to monitor side effects, keep doctors aware of the patient’s condition and generally boost the chances for optimum compliance and a successful patient outcome.

Patient navigators also help patients through the co-pay process, including lining up available funding from health advocacy groups, public funding sources or even local churches to help with those expensive out-of-pocket costs. “These drugs are really expensive. They’re almost always the highest-tier co-pay you can have. And most of the time, it’s not going to be a one-month treatment,” said Saraniti. “It’s going to be an extended period of time. And if it’s \$250 a month for a co-pay, it can add up very quickly.”

Thus, “if the co-pay is going to be a barrier for the patient, the patient navigator has a list of sources they can start working with to see if there’s any funding available,” he said.

Commcare, said its CEO, has several major advantages over a traditional retail pharmacy operation dealing in specialty meds. “We understand the local markets wherever we operate because of those service representatives, and we can react quickly. Secondly, our technology allows us to track every patient and script elec-

Above: At its Fort Lauderdale, Fla., operation, Commcare employs five “patient navigators,” who function as hands-on patient advocates and work with the patients and payers for successful therapeutic outcomes.

Right: Commcare sets the bar high for pharmacy technicians like Pedro Castillo.



tronically. We’re doing 100 prior authorizations a day, and the patient navigators can tell you the status of any one of them at any given time.”

Commcare uses its patient-tracking technology to prepare report cards on every patient for physicians and plans, providing a comprehensive picture of drug compliance rates, potential problems, side-effect profiles, etc. “Everything we’re doing with the patient is documented and audited. So if we contract with a managed-care plan to provide disease management for their HIV or oral oncology patients, they can come in here at the end of the year and physically look at the service we provided for those patients. All these touches with the patients are documented,” Saraniti explained.

“We look at medication possession ratios and ‘LOTs,’ or length of therapies, and between those two benchmarks, we’re able to give a report card to the patient, the physician and the managed care company on patient compliance,” he

added. “We literally make it that simple, where we give an ‘A, B, C, D or F’ based on those two ratios.”

Result: “We typically run in the mid- to high-90s in compliance rate percentages. Our patient navigators and outside service representatives enable our internal staff, our pharmacists and technicians to have those conversations with the patient on a regular basis and address the side-effect issues,” he said.

In line with that hands-on, holistic approach with the patient, Commcare sets the bar high for its pharmacists and technicians. “I don’t know what techs are making at retail right now, but I can tell you ours are making two to three times that,” asserted the company’s CEO. “We hire smart, qualified people. They’ve grown with us, and we want this to be a career for them, not just a job.

“If you have a big-chain retail mentality, you’re not going to cut it here because we expect you to maintain patient relationships,” he said. ●

SUBSCRIBE TO



DRUG STORE NEWS
specialty
pharmacy
The source for business insights, analysis and perspective

**PREMIERE
ISSUE
AUGUST 2009**

**Thousands of breakthrough
pharmaceutical products.**

**More access for millions
of hopeful patients.**

**Hundreds of billions of
dollars driving development.**

**NOW ONE SOURCE
COVERS IT ALL.**

Produced in
association with
ARMADA
Health Care

www.drugstorenews.com/specialtypharmacy

Fueled by an expanding pipeline of complex products and protocols, the specialty pharmacy market is forecast to grow from \$80 billion to more than \$500 billion in the next 15 to 20 years.

From one end of the market to the other, only *Specialty Pharmacy* covers the innovations, issues and big ideas that are building this business.

If you're involved in the distribution, production or manufacturing of specialty pharmaceuticals, or if your company provides benefit services to specialty pharmacies and their patients, subscribe to *Specialty Pharmacy*, your source for business insights, analysis and perspective.

**To start your free subscription to
Specialty Pharmacy call (800) 766-6999**

www.drugstorenews.com/specialtypharmacy