



Community-based retail pharmacy's role in collaborative healthcare

The days of retail pharmacy being confined to filling prescriptions are over. The future-focused pharmacy is broadening its footprint, evaluating new care models, and positioning itself as a community hub.





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The Association of American Medical Colleges

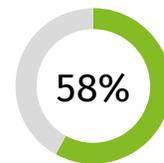
Today's pharmacy: Poised for more than medication

The retail pharmacy industry in the United States is at an inflection point – facing some of its greatest challenges in decades while also poised to expand its footprint into a wider range of services than ever before.

Pharmacy needs to break out of its traditional patterns. Concerns over the burnout, understaffing, and medication errors¹ that existed before the COVID-19 pandemic remain prominent throughout the workforce. A growing number of store locations are closing,² while consumer demand for pharmacy services³ continues to climb.

Despite these pressures, retail pharmacies find themselves emerging as perhaps the most accessible healthcare provider at a time when accessibility is among the most desirable traits consumers are seeking. Whether it's the convenience of 24-hour drive-through windows or the on-demand helpfulness of walkup, in-person consultations, pharmacies are filling some of the void being created by decreasing numbers of primary care physicians in the U.S. – the Association of American Medical Colleges is projecting a shortage of **20,000-40,000 primary care doctors by 2036**⁴

According to the Wolters Kluwer Pharmacy Next consumer survey⁵,



of Americans are likely to seek non-emergency care at pharmacies, and among those the highest percentages are Millennials and Gen Z⁶ – an indication that these trends are here to stay. To meet this demand, retail pharmacies have been expanding their care services beyond dispensing medication, into areas such as vaccinations and treating minor injuries or infections.

“When we think about a pharmacist today, we think very medication-centric – from the operations of filling and dispensing the medication, to ensuring the safety of the prescription and checking drug interactions or dosing,” notes Garry Marshall, Senior Director of Pharmacy Strategy, Clinical Effectiveness, for Wolters Kluwer. “But when you look ahead, the table is set to move away from being medication-centric to being patient-centric. The medication can be the doorway. But once we understand your medication, let’s talk more about your condition.”

To be the accessible and trusted care center consumers need it to be, the future-focused pharmacy will need to open its doors and broaden its strategies to a community-centric approach:

- Value-based care in today's retail pharmacy
- Adopting a collaborative care model
- What is a community-centric approach?
- Technology's role in value-based care

Value-based care in today's retail pharmacy

Expanding the community focus of retail pharmacy will help support value-based care initiatives, which tie reimbursements to the quality of results rather than the more traditional standard of fee-for-service. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) expect all Medicare beneficiaries will be in value-based care programs and models by 2030⁷, and retail pharmacies are set up to play a critical role in this transformation away from volume-based to care-centric outcomes.

Part of the move to value-based care may require a change of perspective throughout the healthcare industry regarding what defines the care environment and the remit of the professional provider. For pharmacists, that might entail using their community presence to engage consumers in the following ways:



Medication Therapy Management (MTM)

MTM programs have been shown to reduce adverse drug events⁸, and with **79%** of patients finding their pharmacist to be a trustworthy source of care⁵, the community pharmacy is the welcoming environment to provide evidence-based medication reviews, pharmacotherapy consults, and anticoagulation management.



Food Is Medicine

The Food Is Medicine Initiative⁹ is designed to prevent and manage chronic disease by supporting healthy food choices through coupons and other interventions. Retail pharmacies can help identify patients who could benefit from these programs and connect them with food and dietary resources to improve their well-being.



Non-emergency Screenings

According to the Pharmacy Next survey⁵, **62%** of consumers trust pharmacists to provide vaccinations, such as flu shots. Building on that trust, pharmacies can become the one-stop shop for promoting preventive care with point-of-care testing for strep, A1c, hepatitis C, HIV, as well as other labs.

Value-based care services in the community pharmacy can help reduce readmissions while improving long-term wellness and building consumer loyalty.

“That’s the vision,” says Marshall. “Going from medication-centric to patient-centric and starting to lean more heavily into clinical services. But when I think about outcomes and trust, it really comes down to the experience we’re presenting the patient.”





What is a community-centric approach?

While value-based care expands the footprint of the pharmacist and pharmacy to encompass more care services and wellness options for consumers, taking a community-centric approach to pharmacy operations further embraces a future-focused notion of the pharmacy as holistic health provider.

“By choice or not, the pharmacist is almost playing a triaging role,” Marshall says. “There’s a lot of trust in the pharmacist, a lot of people coming through asking a lot of questions, and we don’t ever expect the pharmacist is going to have all the answers. That’s why it’s so powerful for pharmacies to have connections within the community to get the patient to the right answer, to the right people” even if that means referrals to an organization outside the pharmacy.

A pharmacy that serves as a community wellness hub and point of referral for patients and consumers not only extends its business beyond dispensing medications, it provides relevant and tailored services that will always be in demand, experts observe, creating a “stickiness” and longevity to help counteract some of the forces contributing to the store closures that create pharmacy care deserts².

A community-centric approach based on outreach and a broader view of pharmacy services and participation in consumer health and wellness can impact holistic care in a number of ways:



Destigmatization:

Some patients feel uncomfortable discussing or pursuing treatment for sensitive conditions (like HIV, behavioral health, or obesity) with providers they may only be encountering once in a same-day appointment, clinic, or urgent care setting. Others who are uninsured or underinsured may be looking for care assistance and to avoid the ER. The ability to offer a more accessible, personalized consult involving community resources often makes the pharmacist an easier caregiver with whom to broach simple questions or some more delicate health concerns.



Cost consultation:

Pharmacists are a valuable resource for patients to discuss drug costs and help connect them to discounts, rebate programs, and alternative therapy options.



Health equity:

No two patients are the same, and understanding how community resources could help improve their access to care or overall wellness is something a community-centric pharmacy is uniquely suited to do – whether it’s referring patients to free health screenings, nutrition counseling, food vouchers, transportation services, or even housing support.



The reimbursement question: Recognizing pharmacists as community providers

Pharmacists and pharmacies are evolving somewhat organically to take on a more community-centric, patient-care role. But the question remains, will the larger healthcare ecosystem support this shift?

“That entire [patient consult] interaction can in some cases happen because you’re in the community and you’re just finding the ways to make it happen. But it needs to be a reimbursable service,” notes Marshall. “Without the infrastructure to have pharmacy recognized as a provider, it becomes extremely difficult to do some of these really valuable services that are not free in terms of the pharmacist’s time, effort, skill, and materials.”

Legislation regarding provider status for pharmacists varies from state to state¹⁰, with all but nine U.S. states mandating some sort of payment for pharmacist-provided services. But that lack of consistency nationwide can contribute to gaps in services offered and gaps in reimbursement. It also creates debate among healthcare entities that may not support pharmacists taking as active a clinical and community role as they are beginning to assume.¹¹

“A first step would be for the government to recognize payment for pharmacy services. And then you would hope that other payers would follow suit, like they do in many instances when they see Medicare make a change,” Marshall says. Reimbursement for more community- or value-based patient care is essential, he explains, to relieve margin pressure and allow pharmacies to continue to expand. “As much as pharmacists want to help people in any way they can, they need to stay afloat.”

Pharmacy adopts a collaborative care model

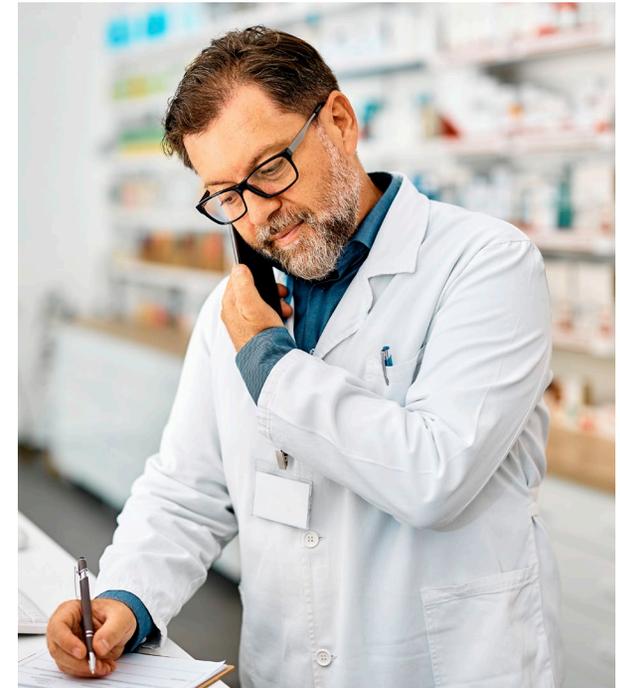
When pharmacies encounter barriers to care for their patient populations – whether those are related to insurance coverage, social determinants, or health literacy – the solution to breaking down those barriers can often lie in collaborating with other healthcare organizations and community resources.

For pharmacy staff, collaborative care begins primarily with education – learning about the available resources in the community, making contacts with other providers and service professionals, and building a library of business cards and referral materials. From nearby provider offices to food banks and shelters, holistic care involves all forms of provider being able to work together to assist a patient, pharmacy leaders say.

In addition to pharmacists needing to educate themselves on the available partnerships and resources in the community, experts advise that in order to implement a successful collaborative model, pharmacy staff also need to be proactive in contacting local providers and organizations to educate them on the availability of pharmacy services and support for community members in need of clinical care.

However, Marshall stresses, when pharmacies collaborate with other healthcare providers and organizations, it is important that they strive to create and maintain a “continuity of care” to help avoid confusion, distrust, and even potentially harmful variability in care for patients.

“Message consistency, just taking time to ensure that what a patient is hearing from a provider and from a pharmacist is consistent and evidence-based, is important and will help grow the relationship as well,” he says.



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**Garry Marshall, Senior Director of Pharmacy Strategy,
Clinical Effectiveness, for Wolters Kluwer.**



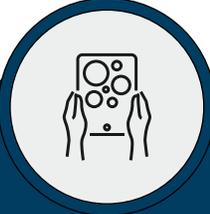
Technology's role in value-based care

In order to pursue a value-based care model and maintain continuity of care and message with community partners, retail pharmacies need the right technology solutions and data to support their expanding workflows and the consistency of evidence-based decision-making.

For both patients and pharmacy professionals to feel confident, pharmacies need current, evidence-based drug and medical data integrated into their workflow systems to provide critical access to decision-making support quickly and seamlessly. It also reduces the need to call a provider's office for time-consuming follow-up questions.

The **UpToDate®** and **Medi-Span®** suites of solutions from Wolters Kluwer are designed help streamline professional workflows while delivering point-of-care access to continually updated and rigorously reviewed drug data, clinical decision support, and consumer education. Trusted, unified solutions are built to work together to keep pharmacy services aligned and consistent and to support interoperability with healthcare partners and community agencies that may be sharing patient data or health recommendations. This helps maintains the vital continuity of care for which Marshall advocates.

A streamlined administrative workflow that helps ease the burden on pharmacy technicians also helps free up time for pharmacists to focus more on clinical services and community care, experts observe.

		
<h3>Medi-Span and UpToDate Lexidrug</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Digital medication content that reinforces the pharmacy as a trusted component of the healthcare ecosystem. → Alerts around potential interactions and other contraindications to help the pharmacist advance patient care. 	<h3>UpToDate Patient Engagement and Digital Architect</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Health engagement programs to improve adherence, wellness, and outcomes. → Automated outreach and support of patients. → Digital medication education leaflets to modernize patient education delivery, improving safety, convenience, and costs. 	<h3>UpToDate clinical decision support</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Fast access to evidence and recommendations for top clinical questions, featuring charts and graphics for easy viewing. → Direct links to clinical pathways to assist with diagnosis, triage, testing and treatments.

Interoperability supports better community care

Information exchange is an ongoing challenge for all pharmacies, not just those looking to expand their collaborative efforts in the community. More often than not, experts note, pharmacies are receiving patients fresh from provider visits or inpatient procedures without their full patient record or the context of their treatment. Similarly, pharmacists say they are being contacted by providers who are reviewing patients and don't know the history or status of their medications or immunizations.

The decades-long quest to improve interoperability and information sharing between healthcare entities may not yet be fully solved, but each step closer to alignment and enhanced communication benefits the community-centric pharmacy.

"Allowing pharmacies to get access to contextual data is going to have a significant impact on patient experience," explains Marshall.

"For instance, with UpToDate Patient Engagement, if we don't have contextual patient data, we almost have to assume all cases are possible. And then you're either inundating the professional or the patient with more information than is pertinent to them. But if we can leverage interoperability and the exchange of information, we can start to tailor the screening and the care to an individual."



To illustrate, Marshall gives an example of a patient taking atorvastatin. Knowing the context of the patient's diagnosis and that it's been, perhaps, a concerning amount of time since their last blood pressure reading, a pharmacy could recommend an intervention and tailor an outreach program with digital education to that individual's needs.

With that kind of helpful personalization of care, "you can build upon that trust the patient has" with the pharmacy, he says.

Marshall stresses that part of collaborative care is ensuring information exchange is a "two-way road. We recognize that as a pharmacy, we need information from providers to have more context to be able to serve the patient. But then we also need that return road to be able to communicate to providers, 'Hey, you need to know I did a blood pressure reading or I did an A1c test on this patient.'"



AI and the community-centric pharmacy

Healthcare solutions powered by artificial intelligence (AI)¹² are dominating the conversation as healthcare leaders want to realize how the potential benefits of these solutions address complex challenges while still being careful to understand and review any questions of appropriateness and reliability.

Marshall says that he sees AI-powered solutions as tools in the pharmacist's toolbox that can help streamline and expedite work and even surface pertinent information quicker. But he stresses the importance of the human clinician interpreting the solution's results. "I heard someone say, AI isn't going to take the place of a pharmacist. A pharmacist who understands how to use AI is going to take the place of the pharmacist."

Learning and growing with the pharmacy of the future

The future-focused pharmacy will look to overcome the inherent challenges of burnout and consumer demands not by contracting, but by evolving, embracing value-based care, and expanding pharmacy services to offer more community-centric clinical, wellness, and consumer engagement programming. By collaborating with other community health and wellness organizations and adopting technology that streamlines workflows, drives evidence-based patient recommendations, and aligns with community partners to improve interoperability and information exchange, pharmacies can position themselves for success.



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