Strengthening the Physician-Patient Relationship

It may be time for pharmaceutical marketers to take a closer look at how they view physicians and to consider whether they are missing opportunities to partner with the physician in an effort to deliver product information and to inform the patient about the medications being prescribed.

By Mark Becker, M.D.

Pharmaceutical marketers work with a variety of individuals and organizations to reach the public with branded messages and product information. These include interactive agencies to develop product Web sites, SEO consultants to drive traffic to those Web sites, pharma's, consumer publications, patient advocacy groups and even celebrities. But what about physicians? These are the experts in the field who diagnose the targeted conditions and have the authority to write for prescription medications. These are the men and women who consumers (patients) trust the most with their care.

In general, pharmaceutical marketers do not view physicians as partners in delivering product information to the end user; the patient. Physicians are primarily seen as a means to increase market share. Indeed, more than $7.3 billion is spent annually on physician detailing to inform and remind physicians about their prescription, and receive the phone calls from patients who are concerned that the medication isn’t working or might be causing side effects. The physician and patient have a relationship.

In spite of the shift towards consumer-centric healthcare, the physician-patient relationship remains strong and is essential for helping patients to understand their diagnosis and recommended treatment plan. It’s during physician-patient interactions that patients need to first learn about their medications and in role in controlling their illness, how to take the medication, how to manage side effects and what benefits to expect.

So how can pharmaceutical firms help physicians educate their patients about the medications they prescribe?

Today’s medical office – poor health communication

Unfortunately, in today’s busy medical practice setting, physicians often fail to communicate all that a patient needs or wants to know. Physicians commonly omit important details when speaking with their patients, including the name of the patient’s diagnosis. In fact, the name of the medication prescribed is not even mentioned during 26 percent of patient encounters. (Tarn DM et al. Physician Communication when prescribing new medications. Arch Intern Med 2006; 166:1855-1862)

And, even if verbal instructions are shared, they are readily forgotten. Dr. Duane Cady, former president of the AMA Foundation, was frequently cited saying “patients forget most of what they are told within six minutes of walking out the door.”

Patient handouts are helpful, and most medical practices offer at least a few handouts on a variety of topics. However, in a 2004 survey of 200 physicians by Salu Inc., 80 percent of physicians reported doing a “poor” or “very poor” job of providing relevant handouts to patients during office visits. Pharmaceutical sales representatives have often observed that many of the branded medication handouts that they deliver to medical offices end up as casual reading material in the waiting room, which are then discarded.

This lack of sufficient communication with patients is damaging to the physician-patient relationship and leads to poor clinical care. A 2005 Harris Interactive survey showed that 43 percent of patients report being non-compliant with therapy due to a lack of understanding about the benefits of treatment.

It’s not that physicians don’t care

Physicians do, in fact, recognize the value of patient education as a means to improve clinical care and patient satisfaction, but they lack the time, skills, resources and focus to communicate effectively to every patient in the bustle of their daily practices.

The positive impact patient education can have on a medical practice was shown in a 1995 study published in the Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology. In the study, 66 percent of physicians who provided tailored patient education content to their patients reported an increase in patient compliance, and 38 percent reported a decrease in patient calls regarding therapy. (J Am Acad Dermatol. 1995; 32:S42-48, Zoe Draelos, M.D.)

But organizing the workflow of a practice to sufficiently address the needs of patient education is too often neglected due to other priorities.

Patients go online… and want their doctors to be there

As a result of leaving their doctor’s office with unanswered questions, patients turn to the Internet to fill the information gap.

Google, WebMD and many health portals offer in-depth health information about most medical topics. But online searches can quickly lead to misinformation, conflicting recommendations and a general feeling of being overwhelmed. The patient may look up Drug A, but end up reading conversion-message from the manufacturer of Drug B, or a recommendation for alternative therapies.

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The role of the physician is presumed to end once the script is written. But what happens when the patient leaves the office with that script in hand? Studies show that 14 percent to 21 percent of the time the prescription is never filled. And, 30 percent to 50 percent of all patients ignore or otherwise compromise the medication instructions they were given. (Wertzheimer, Al, Santelli T.M. Medication Compliance Research. Still So Far to Go J Appl Res Clin Exp Ther, 3 (3), 2003 Armstrong C. Medication Adherence: EBM Solutions Guide.)

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A small survey of dermatologists performed in 2007 by Vivacare which they can refer their patients for health information. A Physicians benefit from having their own online resource to

A physician-directed educational resource online find it difficult to maintain. Even practices that are motivated to create an educational site provide in-depth educational content and administrative information and promoting physicians and their specialty. Most of these Web sites are focused on providing

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But most doctors are not online with health information. Users are interested in getting health information from their own physician. A survey found that 62 percent of online patients want information from the source they trust most.

Patients benefit by gaining convenient access to health information that reinforces what they learned (or should have learned) in the doctor’s office. The resource helps them gain a firm grasp of their own doctor’s first opinion before going to

Physicians want to personalize it and brand it as their own. Most importantly, physicians need to have control of the content so that it reflects their personal approach to care.

In order to offer value for physicians, this resource needs to cover the wide range of conditions they treat, procedures they perform and medications they prescribe. For instance, a physician who treats asthma wants information about the different types of asthma, an asthma diary, tips on using a peak flow meter, a flu vaccine handout, and information about the


Manufacturers hope that patients will go directly to their own doctor, compared to only 7 percent in ads from corporations. Distributing product information through a physician-branded educational Web site.

An opportunity for pharma companies, physicians and their patients all win by start their online search for health information at their own support program. They can, however, suggest that patients

Physicians cannot keep track of the myriad of resources online, so that 88 percent found value in distributing rebate coupons through the doctor’s own patient education resource. These coupons were available through the doctor’s own patient education resource. Ensuring that appropriate and helpful product information is

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DTC Perspectives

• 77.8 percent stated that the doctors who prescribed a medication were helpful in recommending it to patients.

• 71.4 percent stated that the patient education materials were helpful in recommending it to patients.

• 47.6 percent stated that having a patient education resource would make it difficult for competitors to market a product to patients.

• 57.1 percent stated that offering an online educational resource would make it difficult for competitors to market a product to patients.

• 66.7 percent stated that patient education improves patient satisfaction.

• 86.7 percent stated that patient education improves adherence to the medication.

• 67.8 percent stated that patient education improves the patient’s knowledge and understanding of the medication.

• 91.1 percent stated that patient education improves the patient’s quality of life.

• 88 percent found value in distributing rebate coupons through a physician-branded educational Web site.
Delivering appropriate information

The physician-patient relationship is changing, but remains strong. Patients will not (and should not) stop going to the Internet to learn about their health, but they should begin their search by referring to the information provided by their own physician.

Providing product information through a physician-controlled channel delivers appropriate information to the right patient (those with the targeted condition) at the right time (when the patient has been prescribed the medication) from the right source (their own doctor).

Physicians that deliver appropriate patient education content, including medication handouts and rebate coupons, can expect to see improved patient satisfaction and increased medication compliance.

Dr. Mark Becker is a pediatrician and president of Vivacare (www.vivacare.com). Vivacare provides medical professionals with free customizable patient education services that deliver disease and product information through a physician-branded channel. Dr. Becker can be reached by telephone at (510)-848-2060, or by e-mail at partnership@vivacare.com.

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PHYSICIAN-PATIENT RELATIONSHIP

Approximately 50 percent to 70 percent of private medical practices have a Web site, depending on the medical specialty. However, only a small percentage of practice Web sites provide in-depth educational content.

Physicians strengthen their voice amidst the online noise and have a useful tool that increases clinical care and patient satisfaction. Patients and their families gain convenient access to health information from the source they trust most.

Pharmaceutical firms gain the opportunity to strengthen the physician-patient relationship and be viewed by physicians as partners that support their profession and expertise. And, in the process, cost-effectively deliver useful product information to qualified patients at the point of care to improve medication adherence and persistence.

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