

## **Medication Safety for Your Employees**

### **How Employers Can Work Effectively With Pharmacy Benefit Managers (PBMs) To Help Protect Their Employees**

**By**

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Pharmaceuticals are an important element in providing quality health care today. With the use of medications, we are able to treat far more conditions, prevent catastrophic health care events from occurring, and keep people healthier. However, all of these advances are not risk free. Medications do not react the same in every individual. A lack of information or ignoring the available information about the potential risks and side-effects can lead to disastrous results ... as we have seen with the recent tragic accidental death of actor Heath Ledger.

While there are many benefits, there are also many ways that accidents can happen with pharmaceuticals. For instance, it is not unusual for a person to have more than one chronic condition and be treated by more than one physician with no one coordinating their care. Or, extensive travel can mean that prescriptions may be filled in many locations, making it more difficult to track potential issues.

Because of all the recent media attention around accidental death from prescription medications, we hope that people will not simply stop taking their needed medications. Pharmaceuticals are a powerful tool in the fight against disease and chronic illness. Taking medications appropriately can improve health and control health care costs. For instance, at CIGNA, we have demonstrated the ability to help members with diabetes lower their blood sugar levels, reduce the number of asthma and diabetes related hospitalizations and emergency room visits, and helped members lower their cholesterol and reach their target cholesterol goals. Comprehensive member information provided by your PBM can be turned into useful tools for physicians so they can intervene and effect positive changes in their patients' health. With the right tools and information, physicians are better equipped to manage their patient's conditions through a more active physician-patient dialog.

Employers may not be aware that there are many safety programs a health plan or pharmacy benefit management (PBM) company can put into place to help protect their employees from potential adverse drug reactions or over-doses. For instance, prescription data can be reviewed regularly for certain controlled substances such as narcotics and medications used to treat psychiatric conditions to identify the potential for intentional or unintentional over-use or misuse. Programs around these diagnoses are typically safety focused, targeting instances where an employee may be going to multiple physicians and pharmacies to obtain and fill those prescriptions. If the PBM is integrated with a behavioral health company, they can work with the member and attending physician to help the employee.

Encouraging the use of a home-delivery pharmacy that is tied to the benefit plan is another safety feature. A home delivery pharmacy can fill and mail a prescription to a member's home or other preferred location, so there is no reason for a member to have to fill a prescription at a new pharmacy while traveling, which can put them at greater risk for adverse drug interactions.

In addition, make sure that the PBM has a national network of pharmacies that are connected electronically to the plan's claims process, allowing drug reviews to be completed while a prescription is being filled at the pharmacy or online with a home delivery pharmacy. The broader the network of pharmacies, the less chance there is to miss a prescription. Some of the capabilities and follow-up actions you should look for in a PBM include:

- Identification of potential adverse drug reactions and side effects with special instructions on how to take the medication and informing the employee about potential side effects.
- Notification when an employee profile indicates that a newly prescribed drug could have an interaction with a prescription drug currently being taken. The prescribing physician should be contacted about a potential significant interaction.
- Warnings when it appears that the physician has prescribed a drug that potentially duplicates the therapeutic effects of a drug the employee is currently taking. The employee and/or pharmacist must then go back to the physician before the prescription can be filled.
- Flagging when doses are prescribed above the recommended maximum so the pharmacist can use his/her judgment to intervene, if necessary, to prevent the employee from being harmed. The systems should also flag prescriptions for which the day's supply exceeds plan limits or the limit recommended by the drug manufacturer.
- Calculating the day's supply that must be used before a refill is allowed. Filling prescriptions too soon could we a warning that the employee is taking too much of the medication.
- Identification of duplicate prescriptions which could be a flag that the employee may be taking too much of the medication.
- Implementation of Prior Authorization which often occurs when a medication has a black box warning label from the FDA, which means that extra caution should be taken and the medications should only be prescribed for certain specified conditions.

Accidents can, and will continue to occur. However, effective pharmacy benefit plans can help minimize the number of accidents by actively working to protect you and your employees.

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