

How to make clinical services your business

By **LeAnn Causey, PharmD**

Causey's Pharmacy is a busy independent community pharmacy in central Louisiana. Founded in 1979 as a traditional independent pharmacy, Causey's has grown to offer compounding, I.V. admixtures, and home medical equipment. In 2003, the pharmacy added its newest venture, RxSolutions, which became the answer to providing clinical services. The practice is best described as an advanced ambulatory pharmacy integrated with a full-service community pharmacy. Building such a practice has been challenging, rewarding, and full of lessons.

In this article, I will share seven of those lessons, which will help students considering developing a clinical pharmacy business in the near future.



LeAnn Causey counsels a patient in her pharmacy.

Lesson #1: Go the extra mile

To join the world of clinical pharmacy, you must be willing to go the extra mile. You must reassure skeptics that pharmacists possess the knowledge and skills necessary to provide these services. And to gain that knowledge and those skills, it is necessary to receive training beyond an entry-level pharmacy degree.

Several opportunities exist for students to gain additional training while in school and after graduation. As a student, take advantage of summer internship programs at pharmacies or clinics that offer advanced patient care services. When your path crosses with an innovative pharmacist, ask for contact information and set up a time to speak more in depth. When you hear of an interesting pharmacy, schedule a visit. I once traveled across the entire state of Iowa and back in a single day just to visit an innovative pharmacy. It is essential to learn from those who have gone before.

Lesson #2: Make yourself the best pharmacist possible

To make clinical pharmacy work in any setting, you will need to make yourself the best pharmacist possible. To me, this meant not stopping after graduation. My personal path after graduation led straight to a residency program. I felt I needed to complete a

residency in order to build the confidence and experience I would need to deliver high quality clinical services. Residencies are available in community, general, and specialty settings, and each offers a unique set of experiences. Students interested in clinical pharmacy should start investigating residency options before their final rotation year.

To find the perfect residency, start talking to faculty members and past residents about their experiences. Attend conferences that showcase residencies and visit with current residents and directors. Make a list of experiences you want as a resident and look to see if an individual residency will offer the experiences you desire. My list included a residency with experiences in a pharmacy-managed clinic, developing new services, and business operations.

Although pharmacy school and a residency will train you well, the need exists to prove your skills and knowledge. For me, that meant gaining credentials through programs such as the National Institute for Standards in Pharmacist Credentialing and the Board of Pharmaceutical Specialties.

Lesson #3: Distinguish yourself

You must distinguish your clinical services from traditional pharmacy services. To accomplish this at Causey's, we took a three-pronged approach—creating a separate entity, establishing a separate facility, and dedicating a separate staff.

For the initial step, we established Causey's Rx Solutions, "The Next Step In Personal Pharmacy Care," which fell under the umbrella of Causey's Pharmacy. We hoped to convey through the name and slogan that we were taking pharmacy care to a higher level. We then separated our clinical services from our other services by providing them in a facility adjacent to the traditional pharmacy. We also dedicated one full-time pharmacist to clinical pharmacy.

Lesson #4: Program development

The types of clinical services that can be offered in a community pharmacy range from osteoporosis screening to general medication therapy management, and diabetes management. Much consideration should be given to which services or programs are developed in your practice. We looked at existing reimbursement avenues, physician support for particular services, patients' willingness to pay, and unmet needs in our community. We decided our first new service would be outcomes monitoring or point of care testing for cholesterol, liver function, and glycosylated hemoglobin (A1c). We made sure that patients' out-of-pocket expenses would be as low as possible. When patients accessed this first set of services, we polled them to discover what other services they would find helpful, which led us to develop an

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American Diabetes Association (ADA)-recognized Diabetes Self-Management Education Program. Reasons for establishing this service included the lack of diabetes education in our community and the availability of reimbursement through Medicare and private insurance. Additionally, offering this service supported many other pharmacy programs such as diabetes testing supply sales.

The third clinical service we developed focused on employee medication use. A self-insured company approached us with the need to lower their medication expenses. We reviewed much of the company's prescription data and designed a program targeting high-cost medications and worked to prevent future medication use. Operating this type of program requires ongoing attention, evaluation, and justification that your services are warranted and remains a good investment for the company.

Lesson #5: Marketing is everything

Marketing is one of the most important components of a successful business, especially for a service-driven business. Clinical pharmacy is a very challenging concept to sell. After a year of heavy marketing, I was approached one day with the question, "In your profession, are you able to answer questions about medications?" This taught me the importance of marketing. Most people have a stereotypical image of a pharmacist in a dispensing role; this must be overcome before the public will see us differently.

Our pharmacy is fortunate to have access to the expertise of a marketing consultant. We involve the consultant in every step of creating our service programs, which allows us to develop services that are marketable. Our marketing approaches have included a wide range of activities, from physician lunches to billboards.

Think of marketing as a medicine for treating hypertension. The first medicine tried may not control the patient's blood pressure. Do you try another medicine, or do you give up on treating the patient's blood pressure? As a good clinical pharmacist, you would try a number of different medications, or even combinations of medications until that patient's blood pressure was controlled. The same is true with marketing. You will need to plan your strategies, implement them, evaluate their success or failure, and then modify your plan until you get the results you want.

Lesson #6: Be prepared to battle

As expected, securing reimbursement for providing clinical services is the largest battle that pharmacy as a whole continues to fight. Develop your service mix so reimbursement comes from multiple sources, including cash, Medicare, Medicaid, or private insurance. Also, look for not-so-obvious payers such as self-funded employer groups. Be prepared to run into several hurdles along the way. For example, one insurance company we billed had a computer software program that would not recognize a pharmacy as a provider for diabetes education. After several long months, we were able to make our case and are now working with the company to rewrite the computer program. Reimbursement

will continue to be a major battle for clinical pharmacy for quite some time, so be prepared to join the fight.

Lesson #7: Mind your business

Do you know what a good profit for your service would be? Do you know what your fixed costs will be? What terminology should you include in business contracts? These are examples of questions that must be answered affirmatively if one is to run a successful business. They are also questions I could not have answered upon leaving pharmacy school. As a student pharmacist, I had very little preparation in how to handle the business activities that go along with my job. If your pharmacy school offers elective courses in business, take them and get ahead of the curve. I would also strongly recommend taking courses offered in the college of business. If you do not enjoy managerial and administrative tasks enough to take a few courses, you most likely will not want to develop a business with clinical pharmacy. Why? Because it is safe to say that for every minute you spend with a patient you should plan to spend another minute performing business tasks.

One thing I like most about my job is the variety of activities I get to perform each day and each week. In a typical week, Monday morning means initial assessments and follow-up visits for diabetes patients, and the afternoon features group educational sessions. Tuesdays, I travel offsite to meet with employees for medication therapy assessments, interventions to physicians, and documentation of outcomes. Wednesdays and Thursdays are sprinkled with patient consultations on a variety of issues such as hypertension management or herbal and dietary supplement use. Between these patient consultations, much of my time is spent in a managerial capacity. Friday's are now spent implementing our newest service—providing insulin pump setups and education. There are always additional projects that require attention throughout the week, such as consultations by physicians for drug information or attorneys on malpractice cases. No matter the type of job activity, my ultimate goal is to meet the client's needs.

Applying these lessons

Take the next step in your pharmacy education and learn outside the typical classes and rotational experiences. Ask your school for help in developing your business skills or finding a rotation site that specializes in providing clinical services in a community setting. One of the most helpful things for me as a student was collecting information on various services, payment issues, outcomes research, and articles on clinical pharmacy that interested me. I still return to these very large files and rummage through them when I am looking for direction or facing a challenge.

Doing clinical pharmacy in the community setting is very challenging and rewarding. Decrease the challenges and increase the rewards by starting your preparation today. And in the words of Emerson,

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