Changing lives one phone call at a time

University of Florida College of Pharmacy students reach out to patients through an innovative MTM call center.

Clockwise from upper left: University of Florida (UF) student pharmacists (L-R) Asia Parham, Kristyn Mulqueen, and Mellissa Chen conduct comprehensive medication reviews; Heather Hardin, PharmD, Clinical Assistant Professor at UF College of Pharmacy (COP) and Operations Manager, mentors UF student pharmacist Michael Swindling; UF COP faculty and student pharmacists on the call center team; UF COP students participating in Aging Sensitivity Simulation Training with Training Coordinator Michele Lawson, RHIT; Hardin, Lawson, Anna Hall, PharmD, Clinical Assistant Professor, UF COP; and Teresa Roane, PharmD, Clinical Assistant Professor, UF COP. Page 41: Swindling and Lawson during orientation.

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lives one at a time

College of Pharmacy students reach an innovative MTM call center

Thousands of members who are part of WellCare Health Plans Inc., are benefiting from a new medication therapy management (MTM) call center at the University of Florida College of Pharmacy (UF COP). As part of an 8-week clinical rotation, 4th-year student pharmacists, under the supervision of university faculty members, learn how to provide MTM services and have the opportunity to counsel patients using their clinical knowledge.

“I have been part of two sea changes in pharmacy: clinical pharmacy in the 1970s and now MTM,” said call center director David Angaran, MS, FCCP, FASHP, Clinical Professor of Pharmacy at UF COP. “The MTM staff and students generate the same level of energy and enthusiasm that we had in the early days of clinical pharmacy. Each day is filled with new challenges and the students experience the uniqueness of each and every person they talk to. Pharmacotherapy knowledge changes like the wind: what remains constant and everlasting is the ability to make another person feel you cared, really cared.”

Launched in March 2010, the call center connects with WellCare Medicare Part D members throughout the United States who meet eligibility requirements for MTM services. The average age of members reached by the call center is 65 years. The individuals take an average of 15 medications and have an average of 10 chronic disease states.

Telephonic counseling

MTM services provided by the call center include a once-yearly comprehensive medication review and quarterly follow-ups. “A lot of people might be skeptical about doing MTM over the phone because we don’t physically see our patients, but we feel that there are advantages,” said Teresa Roane, PharmD, Clinical Assistant Professor at UF COP, who oversees the practice model component of the call center. “We schedule [the medication review] when it is convenient for the patients and give them our undivided attention for at least 30 minutes.”

Counseling patients who are in their own home can be an advantage, according to Heather Hardin, PharmD, Clinical Assistant Professor at UF COP and Operations Manager for the call center. “They are more comfortable, safe, and secure, and we feel like we get a lot of information from them that might not otherwise be shared,” such as suicidal thoughts, admission of literacy issues, use of herbals, past drug/alcohol abuse, and concerns about eating disorders or sexual dysfunction. “The patients also don’t have to worry about transportation or about being at the pharmacy at a specific time,” Hardin added.

While telephonic MTM does offer many advantages to the WellCare members, it has some limitations. “We realize that we can’t visually assess a complication or assess inhaler technique for example,” said Anna Hall, PharmD, Clinical Assistant Professor at UF COP, who oversees quality assurance measures for the call center. “If we have a person on the phone who we think is having problems, we always refer them back to their own personal pharmacist or physician. We recognize our role as learned intermediaries among the patients, their own personal pharmacist, and their physician.”

Student training

Before calling individuals, student pharmacists receive a week of orientation during which they learn about empathic communication and ethnic, generational, and financial diversity. Students also learn how to communicate with physicians in a way that is guideline based, professional, and nurturing to the triad of the patient–pharmacist–physician relationship.

Student pharmacists are also required to complete Aging Sensitivity Simulation Training, during which they experience what it might be like to have visual and hearing disabilities and difficulties with motor skills.

The students are also trained in crisis management. “We fully prepare the students from both a clinical standpoint and a humanitarian standpoint before they ever make their first call,” said Michele Lawson, Registered Health Information Technician and MTM trainer at UF. “They learn to have a great bedside manner and to have empathy when talking to patients.”

The call center houses 12 workstations for the students and an additional 6 workstations for training purposes. Twelve student pharmacists staff the call center at any given time.

Approximately 25 calls are scheduled every day, including evenings and weekends. Once the schedule is created, students review the members’ medical history and do a complete work-up to identify issues to discuss with them. Lawson, Roane, Hall, and Hardin supervise the students.

“We have a chat feature where if a student gets into a situation [where they need help], they can chat with one or all of us” for guidance, said Hall. “When we have a crisis call, one of us will always go to the student’s side for support.” Meanwhile, another pharmacist looks up the member’s medical history and communicates important information via the chat feature. The staff can always listen to calls live and and support the students or intervene if necessary.

“The students say that this is one of the rotations where
they get the most patient interaction and really get to assume the role of the pharmacist and talk to patients,” Roane told Pharmacy Today. “Making about 60 to 70 calls during the 8-week rotation helps students build confidence.”

Handling calls
In addition to medication review and patient counseling, student pharmacists may encounter a crisis call, which may include a suicide concern or a medical emergency. Lawson recalled a recent experience in which a student pharmacist called an individual who did not sound well.

“We always tell the student to listen carefully to the patient. This patient sounded winded, had difficulty communicating, and was very difficult to hear. We went into crisis mode and the student asked if she could call 911 for the patient.

The patient said she would call 911 herself,” said Lawson. The patient stopped responding, however, and the only sound the call center could hear was the patient’s television in the background.

“It took about 20 minutes to get 911 assistance since the patient was not in our state,” said Lawson. “We stayed on the line until we heard the paramedics enter the home. We called back a few days later and the patient said she was so thankful for our call because she had a very increased blood glucose level and had been going in and out of consciousness. Because we called at that time and called 911, we got her the help she needed.”

Student pharmacists need to be prepared for anything, from a routine counseling call to a medical emergency. At the beginning of one MTM call, a patient told the student on the phone that she and her physician had decided to begin end-of-life measures and to discontinue her medications. “The student was not prepared for that, but he composed himself enough to say, ‘I am still here for you, and if you would like to tell me what they have started you on to make you more comfortable, I would be happy to guide you,’” said Lawson. “The patient was thankful to have someone so supportive on a day where she made what was probably the most difficult decision of her life.”

MTM counseling
On average, the call center team identifies approximately seven potential drug-related problems per completed comprehensive medication review, including issues with new prescription medications, OTCs, herbal supplements, home remedies, nonadherence with therapeutic advice, and new drug interactions.

“The patient interview allows us to eliminate an equal number of suspected drug-related problems—false positives—found during the precall chart review,” Lawson told Today.

Roane pointed out that although student pharmacists provide MTM counseling, they do not tell individuals to start or stop a medication or to make any changes with their diet or exercise. “If we find a problem that needs to be addressed immediately, we pick up the phone and call the physician’s office or their pharmacist. Sometimes we don’t know the whole story and we want to make sure we make good decisions about what is in the best interest of the patient. We don’t start or stop anything without directing a patient back to their personal pharmacist or physician,” she said.

After students complete their rotation, they realize that MTM is an opportunity to enhance the role of the pharmacist and contribute to the health care team. “All of us here have a fire in our belly to make this call center successful,” said Hardin. “MTM allows us to be part of creating a successful situation that will reflect positively on all of pharmacy.”

—Amy K. Erickson Contributing writer