



Consultant Pharmacists Help Residents Age in Place

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Many elderly Americans choose assisted living with the hope of “aging in place” in an environment as close as possible to the homes they left behind. But, with increased numbers of frail elderly entering assisted living, facilities face the challenge of maintaining the feel of a residential setting (the industry’s hallmark) while providing supportive services that enable care for evolving acuity needs.

Progressive assisted living communities can use consultant pharmacists to help residents maintain healthy, independent lifestyles longer - while managing overall costs. Consultant pharmacists are specifically trained to provide cutting-edge solutions, clinical expertise and customized health care services to manage chronic and acute conditions, allowing facilities to retain those residents longer and make aging in place a reality.

The use of consultant pharmacy services sets facilities apart from the competition by creating protocols of excellence that zero in on the chronic conditions of the elderly (e.g., dementia, depression), in addition to those elderly most at risk. Wellness models, which can affect the long-term outcome of the resident, directly and indirectly enhance retention of residents without the feel of an institutional model.

THE ROLE OF THE CONSULTANT PHARMACIST

On average, a typical assisted living resident takes 12 medications per day, including prescription and over-the-counter drugs. Effective medication management can be daunting under those circumstances, especially given the limited staff support in many assisted living facilities. Consultant pharmacists can train staff members to properly store and administer medications - and to supervise residents’ medications correctly.

Consultant pharmacists are specifically trained to provide cutting-edge solutions

This process has the long-term effect of extending staff members’ capabilities and knowledge. In addition, consultant pharmacists can alert staffs to potential problems, such as contraindications or side effects. This type of staff support also promotes retention of staff who feel empowered to handle the complexities of medication management.

For both facilities and their residents, consultant pharmacists can save money by reducing the number of unnecessary drugs taken by residents. Through drug regimen reviews and disease management programs, consultant pharmacists often can reduce residents’ dosage amounts and the number of medications taken. Furthermore, consultant pharmacists might suggest changes in therapy, such as the use of more modern, more appropriate drugs, or they can cut costs by suggesting the use of a generic equivalent. For large chains, a dedicated formulary might prove useful when coordinating proactive disease management.

DRUG REGIMEN REVIEWS

Drug regimen reviews are an important service provided by consultant pharmacists to improve the quality of residents’ lives and health. Consultant pharmacists will review residents’ medications when they enter a facility and regularly thereafter, or as contracted by the facility. These reviews enable consultant pharmacists to note medication problems - including duplications, over-medication and contraindications - that might be potentially harmful to residents. Drug regimen reviews also help caregivers improve drug therapy outcomes by identifying what medications work and which cause problems.

The reviews offer several benefits:

- Prescribers select the most appropriate,

cost-effective medications;

- Facilities ensure the continuous safety and health of residents; and,
- Residents receive proper care and treatment, ensuring continued good health.

DISEASE MANAGEMENT

Consultant pharmacists will work with facilities and their doctors to manage common but expensive conditions such as dementia, depression and osteoporosis. Disease management programs improve residents’ health and help facilities with cost-containment by monitoring, and sometimes reducing, the length of time a resident takes a medication, the dosage amount, treatment costs and disease recurrences.

With the aid of computers, many long-term care pharmacy companies have developed disease management programs to assist facilities in providing better care and patient outcomes. Disease management programs take information about residents, such as disease state, age, weight, lifestyle habits, diet and medications, and input this data into resident care models that prescribe appropriate recommendations. From this information, graphic printouts offer treatment trends, patient demographics and patient outcomes.

OSTEOPOROSIS MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

One example of a proactive disease management program that greatly facilitates aging in place for assisted living facilities is PharMerica’s Osteoporosis Management Program. With the aid of a computer program that assesses osteoporosis risk, Merck’s OsteoPro, PharMerica consultant pharmacists help facilities and residents take proactive steps to identify residents at risk for osteoporosis and offer therapeutic recommendations.

Using data such as age, sex, medication history, body build and a history of fractures, PharMerica consultant pharmacists can

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identify which residents are at greater risk of incurring bone fractures. The pharmacists then recommend therapies, such as prescription drugs, vitamin supplements or hormone replacement therapy, to the resident's physician to treat the osteoporosis.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

Consultant pharmacists also can provide an important educational link between residents and their families, facility staff and doctors by conducting educational forums. Often, these programs are tailored toward nonpharmacy-educated people, such as aides. In addition, a facility can open these forums to the community as a marketing tool for future referrals.

Some sessions are designed to familiarize facility staff with the most common medications taken by assisted living residents, as well as how to administer or supervise the medication administration - and keep proper medical records. At "family nights," consultant pharmacists can teach residents and families about the purpose of each medication taken, the proper time of day to take the medication and possible side effects or complications. These sessions provide an opportunity for residents and family members to voice concerns about treatments, learn more about disease states and monitor treatment progress. Consultant pharmacists also can teach residents and their families to communicate better with their physicians - an important consideration when residents have questions about therapy concerning proactive disease management.

CHALLENGES

Assisted living residents tend to have many physicians involved in their care, including

primary care physicians and specialists, such as cardiologists and oncologists. With so many clinical professionals involved, it is critical that one person - the consultant pharmacist - monitors all the medications administered for each resident and creates a communication triangle that keeps physicians and providers in agreement. This communication is especially important for assisted living facilities that do not have medical directors. The consultant pharmacist becomes the vital link in the communication process, because it is often the consultant who first becomes aware of potential medical problems.

But residents and their families often are not used to having an outside party, such as a consultant pharmacist, involved with the residents' health care. Consultant pharmacists must establish credibility with residents, families and, most importantly, physicians. Only then can all parties - residents, facilities and physicians - benefit from the expertise and knowledge accessible through consultant pharmacy services.

The uncontrolled environment of assisted living facilities poses another challenge. Some assisted living facilities allow residents to store and administer their own medications. In this situation, consultant pharmacists might counsel residents on a monthly basis - reviewing availability, expiration dates and accurate dosing of medications. In addition, consultant pharmacists can have significant input on determining whether a resident can continue self-medication. It is important for facilities and consultant pharmacists to continually monitor for over- or under-use of medications, or missing med-

ication.

CONCLUSION

Successful aging in place doesn't just happen. It takes a commitment on the part of providers to ensure that residents receive the level of care necessary to enjoy healthy, full lives. By identifying - and then correcting - potential problems, consultant pharmacists help residents age in place to the highest degree possible. In the competitive, consumer-driven market of assisted living, consultant pharmacists bring value-added services too important to be ignored. These services give your community a comparative advantage while promoting a wellness approach that residents value.

But perhaps most important, assisted living facilities can enjoy longer resident tenancy and strengthen recruitment efforts through the services provided by consultant pharmacists.

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