

CASE STUDY

UHS Expands Specialty Pharmacy Services to Improve Patient Care



Leigh Briscoe-Dwyer, PharmD, BCPS, FASHP
System Director of Pharmacy
~ United Health Services (UHS)



William Waldron, RPh, MHA
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A COMMITMENT TO COMMUNITY

United Health Services (UHS), a large health system located in upstate New York with over 60 locations, including three hospitals, is committed to giving patients easy access to quality healthcare across the region. That's why in 2019, the health system launched its outpatient specialty pharmacy for UHS Binghamton General Hospital, which includes the Wilson Medical Center.

According to William Waldron, RPh, MHA – Director of Outpatient Services at UHS, their journey to establish a specialty pharmacy began in 2018. "After our previous director of pharmacy attended a focused session on specialty pharmacy services at a national industry conference, we decided to take a closer look at our infrastructure to see if it made sense for our organization and our community," he explains. Working with an external consultant on this analysis, UHS found that nearly 50% of their clinics served specialty patients. Additionally, patients in many surrounding counties continued to lose access to medications as local pharmacies closed their doors. "This led us to the conclusion that adding a specialty pharmacy division would be an important, clinically effective service for the communities we serve."

Given the complexity of launching and managing a specialty pharmacy, UHS chose to work with a company to establish and operate its service just before the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. While the service grew steadily, Waldron believed opportunity existed to maximize growth and results. "We transitioned our partnership to Trellis Rx in October of 2022, and their unique model began to make a difference – to our patients and physicians – right away."

A PATIENT-CENTRIC BUSINESS MODEL

Trellis Rx, a division of CPS and one of the country's largest pharmacy and hospital service providers, works with health systems to offer integrated specialty pharmacy care to patients. For UHS, this partnership meant helping them realize their patient-focused goals by embedding onsite pharmacists and liaisons into clinics and expanding medication access, specifically in chronic disease management.

Local Pharmacists and Liaisons

"One of the things that makes our approach different," says Fredrick Campogni, PharmD, BCMAS, 340B ACE, AAHIVP, CSP, DPLA – VP, Onsite Operations at Trellis Rx and GM of UHS Specialty

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Fredrick Campogni, PharmD, BCMAS, 340B ACE, AAHIVP, CSP, DPLA
Vice President of Onsite Operations
~ Trellis Rx, a division of CPS

General Manager
~ UHS Specialty Pharmacy Services

Pharmacy Services, “is our commitment to embed local people directly into the health system.” That includes pharmacists and pharmacy liaisons who assist providers, nurses, and patients as integrated, accessible members of the care process. “By working in clinics side-by-side with the providers and meeting with our patients in person,” says Alexis Gately, PharmD — Clinical Operations Manager at UHS Specialty Pharmacy, “the pharmacy becomes a familiar face — not someone in the distance or at some other pharmacy miles away.”

With this local approach, Trellis Rx first set out to hire seven pharmacists and 21 pharmacy liaisons from the surrounding community to support existing UHS clinic staff. Campogni says, “This onsite model allows our team members to establish strong personal relationships with clinic staff and patients, some of whom they might already know, which is critical to managing patient health.”

As direct resources for those patients and providers, the new pharmacy team implemented Trellis Rx’s comprehensive care model. Liaisons introduce patients to the UHS Specialty Pharmacy, process prior authorizations on the clinic’s behalf, and secure financial assistance to ensure affordable access to care. “As specialty pharmacists,” Gately says, “being that resource for the providers is huge.” Pharmacists can advise providers about which prescription may be more suitable given a patient’s financial situation or medical history, and they can do so before the medication even gets dispensed. “Being able to use my pharmacy knowledge and directly benefiting patient care in this way is just so rewarding.”

Expanded Access to Medications

When they first launched the specialty pharmacy, UHS started with a select list of medications. “One of the most difficult things for us in the beginning — especially during the pandemic shutdowns — was payor access,” Waldron says. Given Trellis Rx’s expertise and relationships with health plans across the country, they immediately helped increase access to insurance markets so more patients could access UHS services and facilities. The first step, explains Campogni, was to conduct an in-depth data analysis to identify patients who might already be eligible for specialty pharmacy services and those payors who could bring more patients into the health system. Trellis Rx then focused on pursuing the best networks for UHS to reach the most patients. “The best care for a UHS patient is a UHS provider and a UHS pharmacy,” says Campogni. “That’s why we really focus on bringing patients here in the community back into the health system.”

THE SUCCESS: INCREASED PATIENT ACCESS TO MEDICATION AND CARE

When Trellis Rx began managing UHS’ specialty pharmacy program in late 2022, the results were immediate and significant. It started with Trellis Rx securing two new payor contracts — and in just five short months, UHS increased its specialty pharmacy prescriptions by 50%. This included a wide range of newly covered medications for chronic disease management, such as insulin for patients with diabetes and blood thinners for cardiology patients.

“The increase in prescriptions helped us grow revenue by about 40%,” explains Waldron. “This growth has also allowed us to provide better care for our patients, including more than \$4.3 million in financial assistance to patients over those five months.” This, he adds, is a big deal since specialty medications are typically very expensive. Plus, Leigh Briscoe-Dwyer, PharmD, BCPS, FASHP — System Director of Pharmacy at UHS, points out that many of their patients come from a lower socioeconomic background. “That financial assistance is important.”

With Trellis Rx as a partner, Briscoe-Dwyer says the assistance goes far beyond the financial. “One of the things I like best about our current partnership is the embedded pharmacists and liaisons

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System Director of Pharmacy
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in the clinics.” They work hand-in-hand with physicians, patients, the nursing staff, and providers to ensure patients get the best possible care. An essential part of that includes obtaining prior authorizations so patients don’t have to wait for the medications they need. “Getting therapies to patients quickly is critical,” says Briscoe-Dwyer. “When dealing with diseases like hepatitis and HIV, days matter. When dealing with diseases like rheumatoid arthritis, where patients are in pain, days matter.”

Once medications are approved, Trellis Rx liaisons then work on the financials for patients, always striving to bring out-of-pocket costs as close to \$0 as possible. Medications are shipped free of charge, and the pharmacists and liaisons guide patients from the start of therapy through monthly follow-up calls to coordinate refills, ensure medications are taken as prescribed, monitor their side effects, and intervene when necessary. “Trellis Rx’s role has just had such a significant impact on our patients. That’s one of the things I’m proudest of,” says Briscoe-Dwyer.

The bottom line, says Campogni, is that managing patient care and prescriptions within the health system is a win-win. “The more patients we can bring on board, the more services UHS can offer to the community for better overall access to care and treatment.”

LOOKING AHEAD TO THE FUTURE

“Our vision for the specialty pharmacy has really grown since its inception,” says Briscoe-Dwyer. “At first, it was a way to provide specialty medications to specialty patients. Now we’re providing specialty care for those patients — reaching them throughout all their visits.” With this growth, UHS is increasing the space dedicated to the specialty pharmacy. “We were able to find a new 10,000 square foot space very close to our medical center,” explains Briscoe-Dwyer. This move will allow the program to continue expanding well into the future. The health system is also planning to enhance their specialty pharmacy service offerings in 2023 to help link the patient journey from an inpatient to outpatient environment. In line with UHS’ philosophy, the goal of the Transitions of Care program is to minimize the risk of hospital readmission by providing a seamless patient experience. To help make that happen, Trellis Rx liaisons coordinate between inpatient and outpatient departments to ensure a patient has everything they need to continue their care in the specialty program and outpatient services when they leave the hospital.

“The partnership with Trellis Rx has gone beyond our expectations,” says Briscoe-Dwyer. “What started as a business agreement very quickly became much more like a family.” Now, she adds, the Trellis Rx employees who have joined us are just part of the health team community. “They fit so well into our culture — we’ve formed a bond and a collaboration I can’t ever imagine doing without.”

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