

CheckMeds NC program helps seniors manage medication

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Nancy Potts lined up prescription medicine bottles in tidy rows.

Once all was in order, Potts was looking at 15 prescriptions, over-the-counter aspirin, an asthma inhaler and a multivitamin.

It was all for one patient.

"Do you have a system for how to take your medication? Do you have a master list that you start with?" asked Potts, a retired pharmacist working through a state-sponsored program to provide medication counseling for seniors.

The woman answered she did - her granddaughter helped her keep track of the various blood thinners, potassium pills, antibiotics and other medicines, telling her when to take them throughout the day.

Still, Potts cross-referenced a list she had typed up of the woman's medicine regimen. She wrote, "2x a day" in bright red marker on the bottles that stated only "Use as directed." She said she would contact the woman's doctor to update and reprint the labels. She advised the woman that her thyroid medicine should be taken on an empty stomach.

Potts signed up to participate in the state's CheckMeds NC program and recently began holding weekly appointments at the New Hanover County Senior Center. Already, interest is high among the center's visiting seniors, many of whom rely on multiple medicines because of chronic conditions at their age.

The program, funded by the state Health and Wellness Trust Fund, pays for seniors



PHOTO BY Paul Stephen

Nancy Potts, a pharmacist with the CheckMeds program, looks over a client's prescriptions for any potential conflicts in the nearly 20 different pills she takes daily at the New Hanover County Senior Center on Monday, Sept. 28, 2009.

to meet with pharmacists for a face-to-face consultation lasting anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour about their medicines.

The service is free to seniors 65 and older who live in North Carolina and are enrolled in a Medicare Prescription Drug Program.

The Trust Fund, which receives money from the state's tobacco settlement fund, launched the medication counseling program two years ago to encourage medication therapy management, an approach growing in popularity to improve patients' medication outcomes by checking their overall treatment plan.

Pharmacists have been used to answering patients about interaction and dosage questions when patients pick up a prescription. But medication therapy management, and the CheckMeds program, carves out time away from the pharmacy counter and looks at all of a person's drugs instead of just one medication.

Medication management is included in Medicare Part D's legislation, but except for a narrow band of patients, it was not reimbursable and did not require face-to-face consultations or using pharmacists.

"It's something that as a pharmacist, if you want to do more, it's a good thing to get into because it allows you to use your clinical knowledge," said Tracy Antoon, a pharmacist with Realo Discount Drug Stores, who meets with seniors under the program in seven different stores in the region from Jacksonville to Surf City.

She said the company hired her specifically to do medication therapy management.

"It's a whole new thing for pharmacies, not to mention our business," Antoon said.

Participating pharmacists get reimbursed now for the service from the trust fund, which also pays for marketing materials.

In June, the health trust fund allocated another \$2 million to keep the program going until mid-2011.

Fund officials estimated the program has helped more than 20,000 seniors in the state and avoided \$10 million in health care costs.

They base those estimates on how drug therapy issues caught by the pharmacist save the patient from otherwise making a trip to their doctor's office (a savings of more than \$320) or being admitted to the hospital (saving about \$20,000).

"It's amazing the things you catch," Abby Caplan, a pharmacist with Kerr Drug, said from the Southport store.

The chain signed up statewide when the program launched in 2007.

Besides potentially saving money for the health care system, the consultations also can end up helping the seniors with out-of-pocket expenses, especially when they fall into the so-called doughnut hole of Medicare's drug coverage gap.

Pharmacists, seeing all the patients' medications, can catch duplicate prescriptions and suggest which ones could be replaced by less costly generic drugs.

"The point is to help organize their medication, understand what it's for, how to do it if they have any questions and how they coordinate their care," Potts said.

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