

THE RX TO EASE A COMMUNITY'S BURDENS

*A Detroit Hospital Helps Low-Income Patients
Obtain Prescription Medication*

BY DIANE L. FENSKE



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Indigent and low-income patients often cannot afford to purchase the prescription medications they need to remain healthy and out of the hospital. To solve this problem, Detroit's St. John Hospital and Medical Center has established the Indigent Pharmaceutical Fund.

A BETTER WAY TO SERVE PATIENTS

Like many large urban hospitals, St. John Hospital and Medical Center found itself with an increasing volume of indigent and low-income patients who had few or no resources with which to purchase prescription medications. Some patients are faced with deciding between having their prescriptions filled, and paying for rent, heat, or food (or in some cases, alcohol or other chemicals to which they are addicted). When those are the choices, medication always has the last priority.

With funding cutbacks in various federal, state, and local programs, the community's pharmaceutical resources had diminished to the point at which it could only occasionally meet a patient's needs. St. John's Social Work and Discharge Planning staff believed there had to be a way for the hospital (while remaining fiscally responsible) to help some patients obtain prescription medications.

As head of that department, I presented to

Paul Van Tiem, senior vice president of finance and a member of St. John's executive management group, the idea of establishing a fund to help patients secure prescription medications. After discussing this with his colleagues, Van Tiem decided to give my suggestion a chance. "We thought Diane's idea fit in well with our objectives—specifically, the efficient use of resources to best serve our community," Van Tiem said.

THE FUND'S GOALS

The Indigent Pharmaceutical Fund was established in 1992, with hospital administration committing \$10,000 to the Social Work and Discharge Planning department. For fiscal year 1994, \$10,000 has been allotted. The fund's goals are:

- To potentially decrease length of stay by allowing low-income patients who are hospitalized primarily for medication noncompliance to return home earlier than anticipated
- To prevent admissions and readmissions resulting from medication noncompliance or from "social reasons" such as using money to buy alcohol or illegal drugs
- To act in a humanitarian manner, consistent with the mission of the hospital's sponsor—the Sisters of St. Joseph—as well as with the institution's own mission

Summary St. John Hospital and Medical Center found itself with an increasing volume of indigent and low-income patients who had few or no resources with which to purchase prescription medications. With funding cutbacks in various federal, state, and local programs, the hospital's pharmaceutical resources had diminished to the point at which it could only occasionally meet a patient's needs.

The Indigent Pharmaceutical Fund was established in 1992. Once a staff member from the hospital's Social Work and Discharge Planning Department has exhausted all patient or community resources, he or she requests assistance for a patient. In the first year of operation, the fund assisted 278 patients at a cost of just under \$5,000.



A Commitment to Community

- To demonstrate social accountability to the community
- To empower non-managerial employees by giving them some control over discretionary funds.

FUND ADMINISTRATION

I administer the Indigent Pharmaceutical Fund, and only Social Work and Discharge Planning employees can initiate use of it. At first, a social worker or nurse discharge planner

determines that a patient needs help paying for prescription medications. In some situations the patient has insurance such as Medicare, but has no prescription coverage, lives on a fixed income, and cannot handle the expense. Or the patient may be homeless, have no income, use the emergency room for healthcare services, and face repeated hospitalizations if he or she does not take a new prescription.

Once a staff member has exhausted all patient or community resources (e.g. family members, friends, and social service agencies), he or she approaches me or one of the other department's managers with the rationale and a cost estimate. The request is then discussed and either accepted or denied based on the responses to the following questions:

- How urgent is the patient's need for the medication?
- What will be the benefit to the institution if the patient gets his or her prescription medication?
- Has the staff member tried all avenues to secure the patient's medication?
- How expensive is the medication?
- Is there a mechanism to help the patient pay for the medication on a continual basis?

St. John's Outpatient Professional Pharmacy fills the Indigent Pharmaceutical Fund prescrip-

The staff works
with outside agencies
to save as much
money as possible.

tions at a reduced fee to the department and bills the department's budget at the end of each month.

LESSONS LEARNED

In the first year of operation, the fund assisted 278 patients at a cost of just under \$5,000. Some of these persons' medication needs were only partially met by the hospital. Additional help came from pharmaceutical companies or phy-

sician office samples. The staff has learned to work creatively with outside agencies to save the patient and the hospital as much money as possible. Pain medications, cardiac drugs, pediatric antibiotics, and costly psychotropic drugs head the list of most frequent requests.

There were no identified admissions or readmissions because of medication noncompliance in the population assisted by the program. Patients are instructed that the fund is available to them on a one-time basis only. Staff speak with a patient's physician about prescribing a more affordable drug if possible. Staff also help many patients who have a long-term need for a prescription medication apply for Medicaid.

A HOSPITAL THAT CARES

The Indigent Pharmaceutical Fund has had many positive aspects. First, of course, patients get needed medication they cannot afford to pay for. The community gets the message that St. John Hospital cares. The employees get the satisfaction of being able to facilitate a discharge and positively affect patient care. And all of us who have been involved have recognized a sense of accomplishment and collaboration. □

 For more information on the Indigent Pharmaceutical Fund, call Diane L. Fenske, 313-343-3684.