The role of the pharmacist in all practice settings has changed dramatically in recent years, resulting in new responsibilities as well as new opportunities. Our role in the chain of health care delivery has become a more active one, and pharmacists are increasingly being called upon to act as consultants, offering unique opportunities to promote effective use of medications, improve public health, reach new audiences, and gain valuable research experience. A new partnership between the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences College of Pharmacy and the Arkansas Foundation for Medical Care (AFMC), the Arkansas peer review and quality improvement organization, is one example of a multidimensional partnership that benefits both organizations, as well as participating faculty members and the general public.

### Background

AFMC is a nonprofit community-based organization dedicated to health care evaluation and quality improvement. Through partnerships with providers and other professionals, AFMC seeks to advance quality, access, and effective utilization of resources in health care by providing quality evaluation and improvement, utilization reviews, consumer education, and data collection and analysis services.

AFMC is the peer review organization (PRO) and quality improvement organization (QIO) for Arkansas. The federal Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA)—now called the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS)—administers the PRO/QIO program, which is designed to monitor and improve utilization and quality of care for Medicare beneficiaries. The PROs goal is to ensure that Medicare beneficiaries receive high-quality, effective, and efficient health care services.

AFMC also contracts with the Arkansas Department of Human Services, Division of Medical Services, to help improve the care provided to Medicaid recipients. The Arkansas Medicaid managed care program, ConnectCare, is a statewide primary care case management program that covers 230,000 Arkansans. Arkansas Medicaid has also enacted an initiative called ARKids First to provide insurance coverage to uninsured children across the state. This program has been expanded under the Children’s Health Insurance Program and now covers more than 65,000 children. Medicaid has been challenged with making complex, difficult decisions about managed care options.

Recently, both Medicare and Medicaid have launched projects related to medication use and pharmacy services, reflecting a growing focus on the appropriate use and cost of medications. AFMC has recognized the importance of having pharmacists participate in projects related to medication issues. Thus, AFMC and the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences College of Pharmacy formed an agreement that allows pharmacy faculty to provide consulting services to AFMC. Faculty members provide AFMC with expertise in drug therapy and pharmacoconomics, as well as research skills. In return, the faculty benefit from opportunities for research, teaching, and service, and the College receives salary support from AFMC. It is a win-win situation.

### Quality Improvement Projects

In 1992, HCFA and the PRO launched the Health Care Quality Improvement Program (HCQIP) to provide physicians, pharmacists, hospitals, and other healthcare professionals with structured, action-oriented projects to improve healthcare delivery, quality, and resource utilization. The HCQIP process involves developing science-based quality indicators, such as the number of diabetic patients who receive the appropriate blood tests, or the number of stroke patients who receive warfarin at discharge from the hospital. The data are then used to develop appropriate interventions—educational materials targeting healthcare providers, Medicare and Medicaid recipients, or the general public. Then the results are measured to determine the success of the project and, if needed, to make adjustments to the message or its delivery.

By collaborating with AFMC, College of Pharmacy faculty have opportunities to work with physicians, nurses, epidemiologists, statisticians, and health communications specialists to design and conduct quality improvement studies. Pharmacists assist in the design of data abstraction tools for Medicare chart reviews and in drug utilization analyses. The interventions also target pharmacists and pharmacies when appropriate.

Faculty also are involved in quality improvement projects in the Medicaid program. For example, one Medicaid project is focusing on the overuse of antibiotics to treat viral illnesses in the community. Pharmacy faculty participated in identifying the problem, analyzing the data, and developing interventions. The data were obtained from the Medicaid database, which contains both medical claims and prescription claims. The intervention included a patient education booklet that pharmacies could distribute to patients and a prescription pad with alternative treatment options, such as OTC medications, for viral illnesses. Having pharmacists involved in these projects provides an opportunity for pharmacies and pharmacists to be included in the intervention phase of the project. Pharmacists can be promoted as an accessible healthcare provider that can improve quality of care.

By participating in projects like this one, the pharmacy faculty have access to the Arkansas Medicaid database, an electronic claims data warehouse. It includes inpatient, outpatient and pharmacy.
claims for each Medicaid recipient as well as recipient and provider enrollment data. Having access to this database provides opportunities to follow patient cohorts and to look at other issues, such as the economic impact of therapeutic substitution. Conducting quality improvement and other ad hoc projects provides valuable presentation and publication opportunities, especially for young faculty members.

Medicaid Managed Care Services

Medicaid Managed Care Services (MMCS) is the division of AFMC that provides external review services to Arkansas Medicaid’s ConnectCare, ARKids First, and other waivered managed care programs. MMCS provides Medicaid with utilization and performance data and strives to improve the quality of healthcare for Medicaid recipients. The MMCS provider-relations team offers feedback to physicians to assist in utilization management and quality assurance.

Through MMCS, performance feedback is given to primary care physicians enrolled in the Arkansas Medicaid managed care programs. By working with AFMC, pharmacy faculty are involved in designing provider “report cards” that include pharmacy issues such as generic prescribing. Currently, the pharmacy consultants are involved in discussions of the feasibility of academic detailing as an option to influence prescribing behavior.

Service Opportunities

Opportunities abound for pharmacy faculty to participate in provider and patient outreach and to promote good prescribing practices. One faculty member is a co-editor of AFMC’s regularly featured column in the Arkansas Medical Society Journal. Two faculty members have authored columns—one on patient safety and handwriting issues and one on perioperative antibiotics. These columns provide an effective means to reach the physician audience about medication issues.

The partnership with AFMC has also provided speaking opportunities for pharmacy faculty at state conferences. These opportunities increase the College’s visibility and facilitate the delivery of information about pharmacy and medications.

PROs and Pharmacists: A Promising Alliance

The potential benefits of this partnership are only beginning to be realized. The faculty provide experience and expertise in areas related to disease management, pharmacoeconomics, formulary decision-making, and other drug therapy issues. In return, the faculty have expanded opportunities for research, teaching, and service. Teaching opportunities are yet to be explored; however, the potential for a rotation site at AFMC and the development of independent studies in drug utilization and quality improvement certainly exist.

Similar opportunities for pharmacists can be found at PROs across the nation. Pharmacists, and the institutions that train them, can work with their respective PROs to foster activities related to improving medications and pharmacy, resulting in better care for all patients. By partnering with a PRO, organizations and providers can achieve a higher quality of care for all patients across the state, regardless of the payer—and pharmacists can find exciting opportunities for professional growth.

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