

PBM encouraging OTC use to counter medication costs

Can insurance companies persuade patients to use over-the-counter drugs instead of prescription medicines to treat seasonal allergies and chronic pain? Interim data from a study by Prescription Solutions, a pharmacy benefit management (PBM) firm based in Cypress, Calif., demonstrates that this can be done safely and effectively and result in cost-savings for both patient and insurer.

For the past six months, Prescription Solutions has been conducting a study with two large medical practice groups in Southern California. The PBM is trying to encourage the use of therapeutically equivalent OTC drugs instead of higher-priced prescription drugs.

Their findings may be especially helpful to senior citizens who have a cap on their prescription drug benefit as well as to other patients with capitated prescription benefits. Substituting appropriate OTC drugs can help opti-

mize benefit dollars by keeping patients from reaching benefit limits too quickly. Prescription Solutions also believes that the utilization of OTC drugs may have a health benefit for members, because many OTCs cause fewer side effects than their prescription counterparts.

Because OTC drugs are not covered by most health plans, Prescription Solutions included, patients are often reluctant to use OTCs instead of the prescription drugs for which they are reimbursed. To address this obstacle, Prescription Solutions tried to ensure that patients in the study would not incur any expenses beyond their copayment for prescription drugs. The PBM achieved this by working with drug manufacturers to obtain free samples and discount coupons for physicians to distribute to patients.

So far, the program has saved providers \$15,600, and, as a result of this pilot study, expenditures by health-

care insurers have been reduced by 12.3%, reported Prescription Solutions. OTC use is up, and that of more costly prescription antihistamines and NSAIDs has noticeably decreased. For antihistamines, one clinic involved in the study showed a 17.6% decrease in the number of Rx's per 1,000 members; another showed a 20.5% decrease. Meanwhile, the number of antihistamine prescriptions for the rest of the network not involved in the OTC study increased 10%.

For NSAIDs, the program resulted in a 12.9% decrease in prescriptions per 1,000 members for one clinic and a 13.1% decrease for another, while NSAID prescriptions for the rest of the network increased by 5.3%.

Prescription Solutions is optimistic about these findings. "The pilot program is a prime example of how PBMs can work with physicians in managing pharmacy benefits. As an added bonus, the pilot highlighted the simple fact that OTC products provide value in treating common medical conditions," said Jeff Herzfeld, Pharm.D., M.B.A., v.p.-marketing and business development at Prescription Solutions.

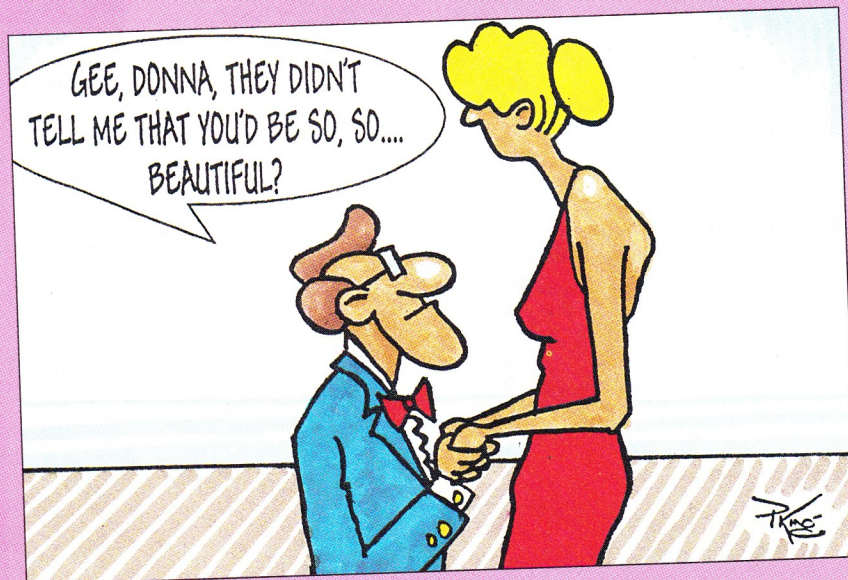
Following the success of the pilot program, Prescription Solutions is expanding it to other interested clients.

Karyn Snyder

NAME THAT DRUG

Phil King, R.Ph.

From the clues given in the cartoon below, you should be able to come up with the name of a well-known drug. The answer to this brain teaser appears on page 80. Don't peek.



Beta-carotene: Where there's smoke...

Beta-carotene, long thought to protect people against cancer, may not be a good supplement for smokers. The National Cancer Institute abruptly ended a study two years before its predicted end date because too many participants were dying. The researchers found that there were 28% more lung cancers and 17% more deaths among smokers taking high doses of beta-carotene than among those taking a placebo. These results apparently mimic those of a similar study conducted in Finland in 1994.

The NCI said it isn't sure whether beta-carotene is really dangerous for smokers but said that they are sure the one way for smokers to reduce their risk for cancer is to stop smoking. **DT**