

The following article – written by our Executive Director, Gina Upchurch, on behalf of the Partnership for a Healthy Durham – was published in the Nov. 12, 2009 issue of The Herald-Sun.

Get Help to Obtain Medications in the City of Medicine

Compared to many communities, Durham has more resources when it comes to ensuring that our residents have access to the medications they need. However, too many people in Durham don't take the medications that can sustain their health and, in some instances, cure disease.

There are multiple reasons why there are “holes” in the Durham medication safety net. For one, providers are challenged to keep up with all of the different drug pricing formulas, and sometimes, write prescriptions for medications their patients simply cannot afford to fill. And while there are – in fact – a number of sources for medication assistance in Durham, many individuals are not aware of them.

Two years ago, we wrote an article for The Herald-Sun about access to medications in Durham, and since that time, there have been several improvements. In 2008, local healthcare providers and advocates helped create Project Access of Durham County. This nonprofit is dedicated to helping uninsured individuals obtain the specialty care they need, including access to the medications that specialists prescribe. In addition, Project Access is working closely with Lincoln Community Health Center, our federally qualified community health center that serves two-thirds of our uninsured population, to expand the list of medications that Lincoln covers. This has been possible because of a partnership with Duke University Health System, Durham County, and the drug manufacturers' patient assistance programs.

Also, the Durham Medicare Rx Network, which began two years ago, continues to add partner agencies. This coalition of front-line providers works to reach as many seniors and people with disabilities in Durham County as possible to ensure they know how important it is to compare Medicare-approved drug plans each year, which can potentially save hundreds to thousands of dollars.

The easiest way to think about medication needs is to break them down into short-term versus more long-term, chronic medication needs. The following are tips to help keep medication costs down and access resources available in Durham, some of which are unique to Durham:

Acute, Short-term Medication Needs:

- If you have prescription coverage, make sure that you talk with your doctor about prescribing something on your plan's formulary (list of covered medications).
- If you don't have drug coverage, ask your doctor about samples that she or he may have to share. These are often the newer, brand-name medications.
- Ask your provider if they can possibly prescribe a generic medication that may save you a great deal.
- If you are still in the hospital but about to be discharged, ask to speak with a discharge planner or a social worker about the need for medication assistance once you get home. Local hospitals will often provide short-term assistance if you demonstrate financial need.
- If you use an out-patient medical clinic that has a social worker, they can sometimes arrange for short-term assistance.

- The Department of Social Services and the Triangle United Way have created the Direct Medical Fund, which provides limited financial assistance for medications. Call (919) 560-8600 for an appointment.
- Numerous human service agencies and faith communities offer short-term help.

Chronic, Long-term Medication Needs:

- Again, one of the most important things you can do is to let your providers, especially your doctor(s) and pharmacist, know that you need help paying for your medications. They can often pick medications that are less costly and still effective.
- Many of the drug manufacturers have patient assistance programs, which provide medications at little or no cost to US citizens who have limited incomes. These company programs each use different eligibility criteria and forms. They can be accessed using several Web sites: for example, www.rxassist.org; www.needymeds.com; and www.pparx.org or call (888) 477-2669.
- If you use a medical clinic that has a social worker, she or he can sometimes work with you and your doctor's office to access the drug companies' patient assistance programs.
- Many generic medications are available at reduced rates at retail pharmacies and some can be obtained for people with limited incomes at greatly reduced prices at www.rxoutreach.com or call (800) 769-3880.
- The Department of Social Services administers Medicaid and Health Choice in Durham, and both programs cover medications. Eligibility is focused on pregnant women, families with children, foster children, elderly, and people with disabilities who meet the income and resource limits. See www.co.durham.nc.us/departments/dssv or call (919) 560-8000.
- The Durham County Health Department has an in-house pharmacy that can be used by patients who receive services at the Health Department. The pharmacy benefits are focused on family planning and treating sexually transmitted diseases and tuberculosis. Call (919) 560-7600.
- North Carolina has an AIDS Drug Assistance Program to help many people with HIV and AIDS medications. See www.epi.state.nc.us/epi/hiv/ or call (919) 715-3111.
- The Durham Center (the local management entity with oversight for public mental health, substance abuse, and developmental disability services in Durham) has a program that helps some of their clients with medications, either via samples or through a contract with a local pharmacy that has a defined formulary. They also help their clients access the drug manufacturers' patient assistance programs. Call (919) 560-7200.
- Lincoln Community Health Center patients (including those seen at satellite clinics, e.g., Walltown, Lyon Park, and Holton) can access federally subsidized medications on a sliding fee scale via Lincoln's in-house pharmacy. They also help their patients obtain some medications through the drug companies' patient assistance programs. Call (919) 956-4000.
- Senior PharmAssist provides financial assistance to Durham seniors 60 and older with limited incomes to help pay for medications. The program can supplement Medicare drug benefits or help seniors who have no drug coverage. In addition, they provide one-on-one assistance to help any Medicare beneficiary, regardless of age or income, sort through the dozens of options for Medicare drug coverage to enroll in the most beneficial plan. Senior PharmAssist also helps participants with the drug manufacturers' assistance programs. See www.seniorpharmassist.org or call (919) 688-4772.

Knowing where to turn for medication assistance is not necessarily simple and having candid conversations with providers about not being able to get a prescription filled is not easy either. However, Durham has many healthcare and service providers who are determined to help. If you or someone you know cannot pay for needed medications, the “best prescription” is to speak up and ask for more affordable options and/or for a referral to someone in Durham County who can help you find assistance.

MEDICARE PART D

Medicare-approved drug benefits are privately administered drug plans that are available to any Medicare beneficiary. The Medicare drug benefit is complex and for 2010 offers a stunning menu of 47 Part D drug plans and 27 Medicare Advantage plans in Durham alone. These plans can change what medications they cover, the cost of the medications, and the premiums and deductibles each year; thus, it pays to compare plans annually.

Medicare beneficiaries with the most limited incomes and resources can get help paying for Medicare drug benefits from the federal government (called the low-income subsidy or "extra help") and/or state government (called NCRx). Many of the agencies listed below, in addition to the Durham County Department of Social Services and the local Social Security Office, help Medicare beneficiaries apply for this assistance.

The annual election period for the 2010 Medicare drug benefit is from November 15th – December 31st.

- Lincoln Community Health Center and The Durham Center are trying to help their Medicare patients with Medicare D decisions.
- Senior PharmAssist (688-4772) and the Council for Senior Citizens (688-8247) are affiliated with the North Carolina Seniors’ Health Insurance Information Program (NC SHIIP) and offer hands-on help sorting through the drug coverage options (please call for appointments).
- In addition, Medicare and NC SHIIP representatives (1-800-Medicare or 1-800-443-9354, respectively) can help by phone or via mail.
- For the Web savvy, consider trying your own luck at www.medicare.gov and see a “cheat sheet” for sorting through the plans at http://www.seniorpharmassist.org/_resources/NavigatingMedicare.pdf

The Partnership for a Healthy Durham is the Healthy Carolinians planning team for Durham and serves as the Health Committee for the City and County's Results-Based Accountability initiative and is responsible for this article. For more information on the Partnership, see www.healthydurham.org or call (919) 560-7833.