VANDERBILT HEALTH | Specialty Pharmacy

Alternative Funding Programs: Patient Voices from the Frontlines

Katie R. Cruchelow, PhD1 | Kemberlee R Bonnet, MA2 | Libby C. Tunison2 | Autumn D. Zuckerman, PharmD, BCPS, CSP1 | David G. Schlundt, PhD2

[1]Vanderbilt Specialty Pharmacy, Vanderbilt Health; [2]Department of Psychology, Vanderbilt University

Background and Purpose

- Alternative funding programs (AFP), are third-party businesses that obtain medication through non-insurance sources
- Navigating the process of medication access through AFPs is complex, resulting in treatment gaps that can ultimately lead to poor clinical outcomes for patients.
- The purpose of this study was to assess patients' awareness, experiences, and medication access experience with AFPs.

Methods

Study Design
Qualitative study with patient focus groups and one interview

Study Setting
Vanderbilt Specialty Pharmacy

Study Sample
All patients prescribed a specialty medication, identified as being enrolled in an AFP from February 2025-August 2025

Study Procedures

- Patients recruited through the electronic health record
- Focus group moderator guide developed by expert team
- Open-ended scripted questions created by the research team
- Patients completed demographic and AFP Awareness questionnaire
- Two focus groups and one interview conducted virtually (60 minutes)

Qualitative Analysis

- Hierarchal coding system was developed
- Transcripts were coded by two experienced qualitative data coders
- Data were analyzed using an iterative inductive/deductive approach
- Themes were identified based on a previously published medication access framework
- Coded quotes were used to identify higher order themes and relationships between themes

Conclusion

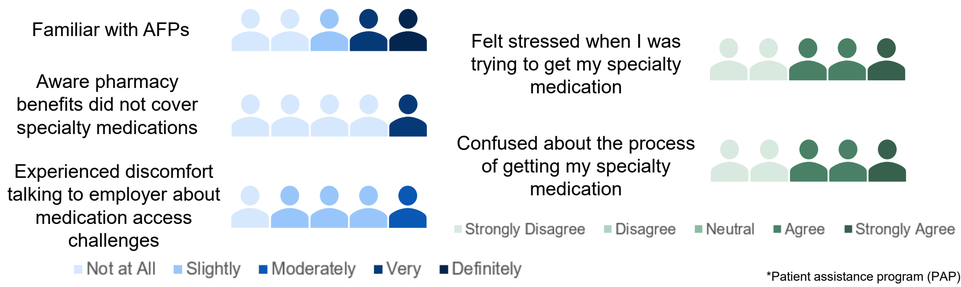
- Patients expressed extreme gratitude for the specialty pharmacist's knowledge about the AFP process and how pharmacists prepared them for what was to come.
- Patients have felt stressed, anxious, and frustrated while trying to obtain specialty medication through AFPs and are ultimately relieved once it's finally approved.
- Emerging AFPs create several roadblocks to medication access and patients often aren't aware that their insurance doesn't cover their medication.

Results

Table 1. Demographics

Characteristic	N=5 n(%)
Age, Median (IQR)	40 (36, 64)
Gender, Female	5 (100%)
Race, White	5 (100%)
Health Condition	
Multiple Sclerosis	2 (40%)
Cancer	3 (60%)
Primary Insurance, Commercial	5 (100%)

Figure 1. Patient-Reported Experiences with Employer, AFP Vendor, and PAP* Application Process



*Patient assistance program (PAP)

Figure 2. Patient Specialty Medication Access Process Framework

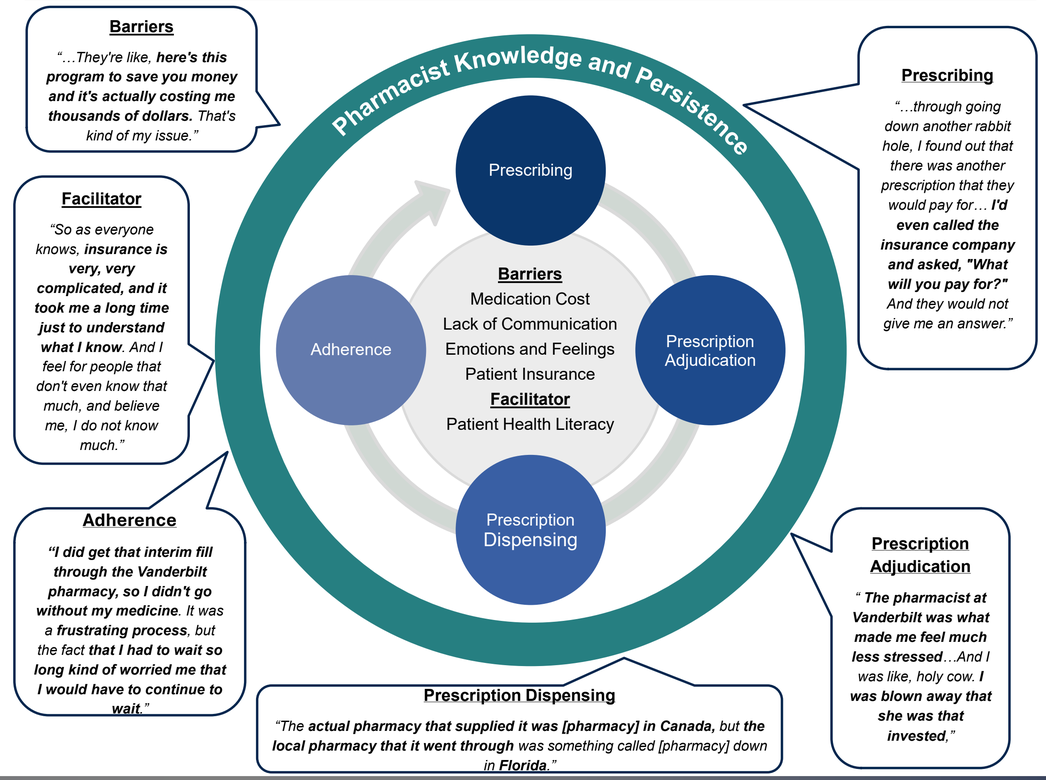


Table 2. Node Summaries

Node	Summary
Pharmacist Knowledge and Persistence	Pharmacist's knowledge and persistence can result in patients having positive experiences with these AFP companies, as patients are often shielded from many of the difficulties AFPs pose
Prescribing	When insurance is unable, or unwilling, to cover the most advantageous medication, the provider must choose an alternative, potentially less-effective medication
Prescription Adjudication	Patients often first learn they must use an AFP when attempting to obtain prescribed therapy. There were several, non-traditional steps required to access therapy and prevent treatment gaps
Prescription Dispensing	Patients are sometimes forced to fill through unknown US-based pharmacies that sourced medications internationally, international pharmacies, or PAP, which can be confusing or ambiguous
Adherence	The AFP process can often delay getting medication for substantial amounts of time, sometimes resulting in a gap in therapy
Barriers	Lack of communication causes substantial confusion and frustration for pharmacists and patients
Facilitator	Patients included in this study seemed to have high health literacy, which was deemed helpful as they proceeded through the medication access process