VANDERBILT HEALTH | Specialty Pharmacy

Alternative Funding Programs: Pharmacist Voices in the Fight for Access

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Background

Alternative funding programs (AFP) are third-party businesses that obtain medication through alternative (non-insurance) sources.

Purpose

To understand the role and experience of health-system specialty pharmacists assisting patients through the AFP process.

Methods

Study Design
Qualitative study with HSSP pharmacist focus groups

Study Setting
Vanderbilt Specialty Pharmacy

Study Sample
Pharmacists who helped patients access medications through AFPs from February 2025-August 2025

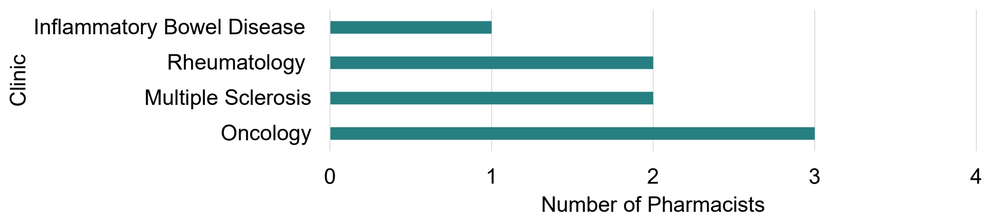
Study Procedures

- Pharmacists recruited via email
- Focus group moderator guide developed by expert team
- Open-ended scripted questions created by the research team
- Two focus groups 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 identified based on a previously published medication access framework
- Coded quotes used to identify higher order themes and relationships between themes

Figure 1. Pharmacists' Clinical Area



Conclusions

- Pharmacists are noticing an increase in uncompensated work that takes away from other patients
- Clinical pharmacists are committed advocates, persistently supporting patients in obtaining access to their specialty medication.

Results

Figure 2. Framework Node Summaries

Employer Health Benefits Plans
When employers are selecting pharmacy benefits plans for their company, they might not understand what they are getting into with the AFPs

Alternative Funding Programs
AFPs market themselves as "third party advocates", providing comprehensive services that will not interrupt patient care

Manufacturer PAP[1]
Some manufacturers are starting to exclude any patient with commercial insurance from eligibility for their free drug PAP due to AFPs

HSSP
Pharmacists are often the first ones to tell patients about AFPs, acting as patient advocates, doing whatever it takes to help access specialty medications

Barriers
No standard AFP communication practices; this is an inconsistent and ever-changing process, and requires a lot of pharmacist time

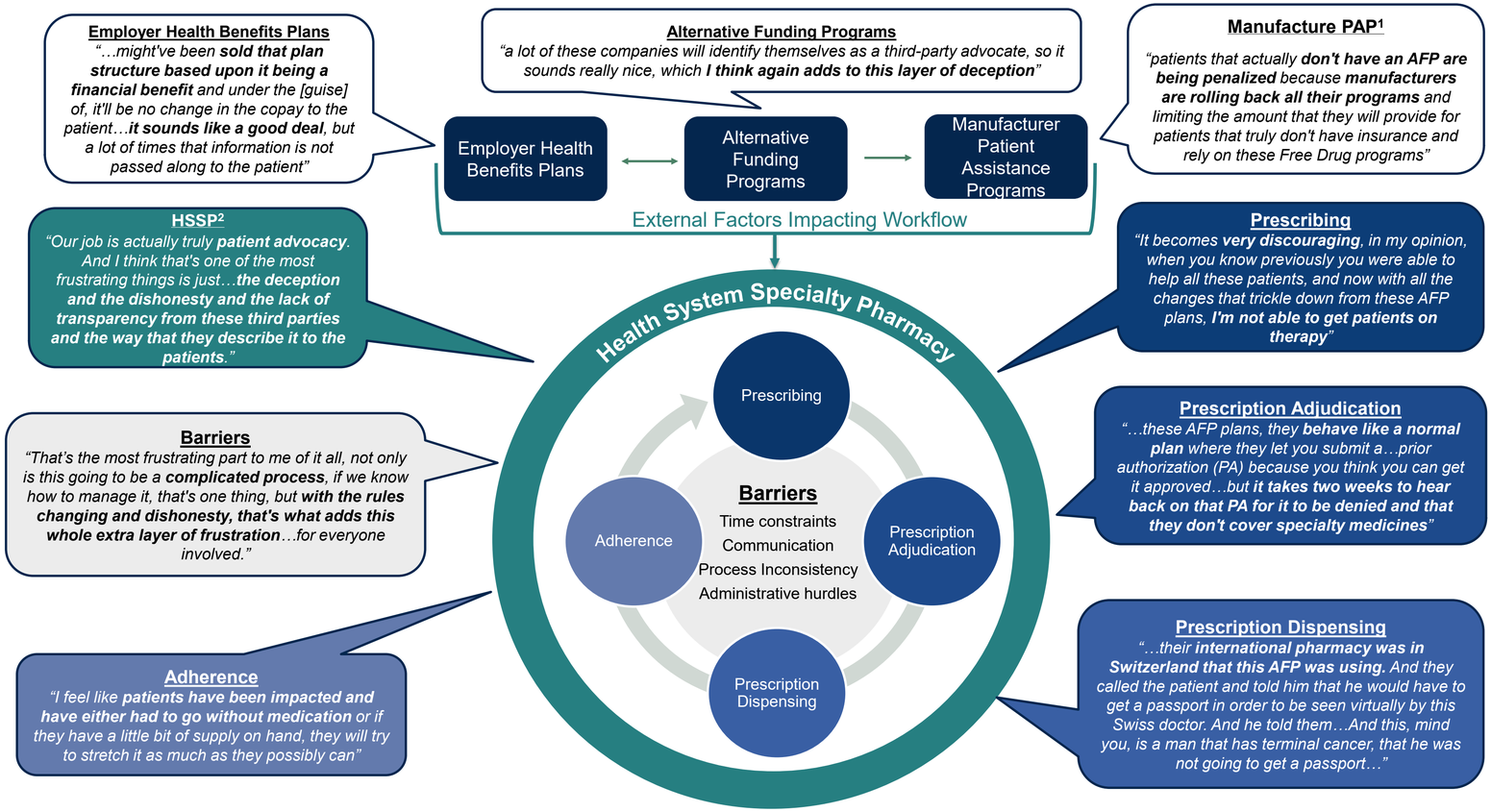
Prescribing
It's hard to tell when a patient is required to use an AFP. This will delay access or even force prescribing providers to change therapies all together

Prescription Adjudication
While this is a confusing process, pharmacists work to be proactive in identifying AFPs to reduce delays in medication approval

Prescription Dispensing
It's taking longer for patients to fill their medication. Sometimes AFPs require patients to fill their prescriptions at non-US based pharmacies

Adherence
Due to insurance changes and new AFP requirements, pharmacists noted that some patients experience gaps in therapy

Figure 3. Pharmacist Specialty Medication Access Process Framework



[1]Patient assistance program (PAP), [2]Health system specialty pharmacy (HSSP),