

Preparing for the Next Step

BY TY STOCKTON
Wyoming Medical Society

Nobody should ever have to decide between buying food or paying for their needed medications. Yet the cost of prescription medications can force many Wyoming residents to have to make that choice on a monthly, weekly or even daily basis.

Insurance can help pay for these medications, as can Medicare and Medicaid. But not all medications are covered by these services, and some patients fall in the “donut hole,” meaning they make too much money to be eligible for state medical assistance, yet don’t make enough money to cover the costs of their expensive medications. Others have circumstances that may require them to work only part-time, meaning they can’t get insurance through their employers, and their individual insurance doesn’t cover the medications they need.

That’s where the Wyoming Medication Donation Program comes in.

The program collects unused medication through donations and dispenses it to people who need those medications but lack the ability to buy them. The collection and distribution of prescription drugs are the chief responsibilities of the program, but there are other advantages that come as beneficial side-effects.

According to the program’s website, when medications are donated, it keeps them from being improperly disposed of, thereby preventing pollution of streams, landfills and ground water; and it also reduces the risk of poisonings by medications that could otherwise be ingested accidentally or by curious children.

In addition, the program’s streamlined services provide a reliable record of the medications they’ve donated. That allows hospitals and the Department of Health to better monitor that people are getting the medications they need.

There’s also the direct benefit of providing needed medications to someone who wouldn’t otherwise be able to afford it.

“Our patients have to be Wyoming residents who have low income (200 percent of poverty level),” said Natasha Gallizzi, the Wyoming Medication Donation Program manager. “We

don’t distribute controlled substances or refrigerated medications, but we are able to provide a lot of the medications many people in Wyoming need. Once a person has completed the application and been approved, we mail the medications directly to them anywhere in Wyoming.”

Gallizzi said the donated medications come from all over the country.

“Most of our donations come from nursing homes,” she said, “but we have 30 donation sites around Wyoming where people can bring unused medications.”

Because most medications are taken by a patient until they are gone, the bulk of the donations come from people who have passed away. Yet through donation, those medicines can help make a difference for another person who needs the same treatment.

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NATASHA GALLIZZI, PharmD
Wyoming Medication Donation Program Manager

“I have a whole file cabinet of people who have been helped by the Medication Donation Program,” said case worker Linda Schulz of Mesa Primary Care in Casper. “I just wish it were more well-known, but it helps so many people, and they’re always so grateful when we give them the medications they need.”

Gallizzi can quantify the help the program has provided since it began as a pilot program in 2008.

“Between when the pilot program was begun and 2017, we’ve collected more than

105,000 pounds of medications,” she said. “That’s more than 15 million dollars’ worth of medications, so it’s definitely helping patients in need.”

Yet despite all the help the program has provided, Gallizzi said the staff still wants to do more. “We get a lot of donations,” Gallizzi said, “and we haven’t been able to keep up.”

The program has grown steadily over the years, and it’s now out of space. Gallizzi said an expansion is underway, and she hopes to be in the new, larger facility in late summer. While the program still won’t be able to provide insulin or other refrigerated medications, the added space will allow the staff to keep a larger inventory, and that in turn will mean the program

can assist more Wyoming residents in need. The expansion also will provide a staff member whose full-time job will be to work directly with pharmaceutical companies to provide free or reduced-cost medications to patients. Creating that direct link between the patient and the drug companies may allow the donation program a way to help patients obtain insulin and other medications that must be kept cold, because the program won't be required to store those medicines.

The program makes it as easy to donate unused medications. Gallizzi said the recipients of the medications are always very grateful to be given the drugs they otherwise wouldn't be able to afford, but the people who donate medications are happy to see that the unused medicines will make a positive difference for another person.

"Donations have to be in a sealed package, and they can't be expired," Gallizzi said. "We have a text line that tells donors where the nearest donation and disposal points are. All

you have to do is text your county name to 307-30-2086, and you'll get a reply telling you the address of the nearest donation point."

Many of the donation sites are public health facilities, but some pharmacies also participate.

Schulz said even the recipients sometimes become donors.

"The people who have been given medications are always so thankful," she said. "They want to help make the program successful. We've had patients bring back unused medications they've had allergic reactions to, or for some other reason can't take the medications. So even those who have been recipients of the free medications will,

from time to time, become donors themselves."

Information about how to apply for the Wyoming Medication Donation Program, as well as information about how to donate unused medications, can be found on the program's website at <https://health.wyo.gov/healthcarefin/medicationdonation/>.

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