Prescriptions by Mail Improve Access and Affordability to Medications for Medicare Part D Beneficiaries

We read with great interest the research published by Dr. Norman Carroll on behalf of the National Community Pharmacist Association comparing the costs of Medicare Part D prescriptions dispensed at retail and mail order pharmacies.¹ The efforts to address the important issue of cost and accessibility to medications in the Part D population are laudable and provide confirmation that patient out-of-pocket costs are lower when using mail order pharmacies rather than retail. Reducing patient out-of-pocket costs via the use of mail order pharmacies helps make prescription drugs more affordable for seniors, which was the intent of the Part D program.² Lower cost sharing removes a significant barrier to adherence to medications, and prior research indicates that a lower out-of-pocket burden on patients is associated with improved adherence,³ which in turn results in substantial decline in total health care costs.⁴ Hence, mail order pharmacies not only lower overall health care costs and patient cost burden, they also improve health outcomes.

In addition, recent research on Medicare Part D has shown erosion over the past several years in medication affordability for patients with multiple chronic conditions. Higher costs are leading some seniors to not fill prescriptions, skip doses, or delay refills.⁵ This population in particular can benefit from the reduced cost burden as well as the safety and convenience of mail order pharmacies.

Our concerns center on the generalizability of the findings. The study examined costs for a narrow range of prescription medications—prescriptions for 90-day or greater supplies of the top 300 Generic Product Identifiers dispensed at mail order and retail pharmacies—which represent less than 15% of prescriptions in retail,⁶ limiting the usefulness of the study findings. The secondary analysis presented by Dr. Carroll is more reflective of actual dispensing patterns by retail and mail order pharmacies and found that the total costs as well as patient costs were significantly higher for retail pharmacies in comparison to mail order.

For seniors with limited mobility, mail order prescriptions offer convenience and safety.⁷⁻⁹ Mail order pharmacies also typically have a comprehensive view of all medications that a patient is taking and offer 24/7 access to a pharmacist for a consultation from the privacy of one's home. As a result, mail order pharmacies are better able to detect any potential drug interactions, address concerns regarding side effects of any medications, and recommend the use of appropriate therapy to patients. All of these help contribute to overall health and well-being of patients, as well as result in significant overall health care cost savings. Managed care stakeholders looking to make informed decisions to improve patient safety and lower overall health care costs should take these factors into account.

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DISCLOSURES

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