



Drug Cost Transparency: Real-Time Access to Drug Costs for Physicians

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The rise in prescription drug costs in Canada has escalated in recent years. Canadians now pay the second-highest drug prices in the world, after only the United States.¹ Studies further indicate that many patients cannot afford their prescription drugs, with one-in-seven patients not filling a prescription and one-in-ten patients not renewing their prescriptions due to cost.² Surveys have indicated that many physicians consider drug cost an important factor when prescribing; however, very few have access to accurate data.³ As a result, physicians are unable to have a fulsome discussion with their patients around prescription drug cost at the point-of-care, leaving patients to contemplate the affordability of their prescription at the pharmacy.

To improve physician access to drug costs at the point-of-care and to fully inform patients on prescription drug cost, the OMA recommends that drug costs be made transparent and easily accessible by making approximate costs of drugs available to physicians in real-time electronic form, when prescriptions are provided to patients. This paper examines the benefits of implementing drug cost transparency in real-time electronic form for physicians, patients, and the healthcare system and explores ways in which drug cost information can be made available in real-time.

Benefits for Physicians

Currently, physicians in Ontario do not have real-time access to drug cost information at the point-of-care. Physicians have to resort to a variety of time-consuming and uncoordinated approaches to obtain drug cost information, including navigating the Ministry of Health's website for the Ontario Drug Benefit pricing list, or speaking with pharmacists. None of these approaches readily provide physicians with drug costs at their fingertips in daily clinical practice, and can often be difficult and

cumbersome to navigate. Due to a lack of an easily accessible, reliable, centralized resource for drug cost information, physicians often lack awareness about the cost of drugs.^{3,4}

Studies indicate that physicians recognize their limited knowledge around the price of prescriptions; however, given appropriate access to information, physicians also recognize that they can play a major role in reducing drug costs and improving patient care.⁴ Furthermore, providing access to drug cost at the point-of-care facilitates potential conversations between prescribers and patients around the cost of prescriptions, allowing both the patient and physician to consider more affordable and cost-effective options.

Benefits for Patients

Prescription drug cost has been found to impact medication adherence, with one recent national survey stating that more than one-in-five Canadians reported that “they or someone in their household did not take their medicines as prescribed, if at all, because of the cost”.² Non-adherence behaviours include not filling a prescription at all, not renewing a prescription, or using other measures to make a prescription last longer (such as skipping doses, splitting pills, etc.).² This phenomenon is known as “cost-related nonadherence” and has been found to result in patients using “more health care services than they would have otherwise”.⁵

The availability of drug costs in real-time electronic form would allow physicians to provide their patients with approximate costs of drugs when prescribing, and provide physicians the opportunity to discuss with patients the affordability of the prescription, including exploring whether cheaper alternatives are available. Such a discussion would provide patients with greater understanding of the cost of their prescriptions before they reach the pharmacy.

Benefits for Healthcare System

Although limited evidence on the impacts of drug cost transparency on the healthcare system exists, the literature available on physician access to prescription cost information and impact on cost indicates a reduction in total drug cost.⁶ In addition, prescribers have been found to switch patients to more cost-effective therapies, discontinue high-cost medication, and optimize dosages on current therapies.⁷

To make informed and cost-effective decisions when prescribing, drug cost information needs to be made readily available to physicians.

Availability of Drug Costs in Real-Time Electronic Form

In order to realize the benefits of drug cost transparency for physicians, patients and the healthcare system, drug cost information needs to be made available in real-time and as seamless as possible with existing electronic systems used by physicians for access to patient information. As a start, this could involve making available the Ontario Drug Benefit Formulary public data on drug reimbursements to pharmacies in existing electronic systems, so that approximate costs of drugs are available to physicians in real-time when prescriptions are provided to patients. Given that a lack of real-time information and time-consuming and cumbersome processes are the greatest impediments to physicians currently accessing drug cost information, the need for real-time and seamless access in electronic form is critical. Technical options for real-time access in electronic form can be explored by the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care in conjunction with OntarioMD.

Additional Considerations

It is important to acknowledge that conversations regarding drug costs between physicians and patients may be time-consuming. Physicians may spend an extended period of time consulting with patients on prescription drug cost – time that is not remunerated. Given the limited time physicians have with patients and in order to ensure time for addressing clinical concerns is optimized, access to drug costs must be made available in a manner that is quick, easy, and reliable, so physicians can be informed at the point-of-care should they opt to engage in discussions about drug pricing with patients. This can be achieved by making drug costs available in real-time electronic form.

Conclusion

Given the benefits to physicians, patients, and the healthcare system, the OMA, on behalf of Ontario's physicians, recommends that drug costs be made available in real-time electronic form, so as to provide physicians with access to this information at the point-of-care.

References

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