



## The specialty pharmacy revolution

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By Jeff Hawes

Specialty pharmacy has become the fastest growing component of pharmacy health care.

In 2003, the specialty pharmacy industry constituted more than \$40 billion in overall drug spending. This staggering figure is expected to rise to \$78 billion in 2008, a 95% growth rate in just five years. By 2010, it is predicted that that roughly half of all new drugs will be specialty pharmaceuticals.

Not surprisingly, those involved in managing pharmacy benefits are hearing the words "specialty pharmaceuticals" and "biotechnology" on a daily basis. Yet, these terms remain poorly understood.

Biotech is the beginning phase of what ultimately becomes a consumer-ready specialty drug. It is the science of manipulating living organisms, especially at the molecular genetic level, to produce new agents. The manipulation of various biological materials results in products that have the ability to treat a wide array of illnesses, including chronic diseases, tumors and viruses.

Once biotech drugs hit the market, they become specialty pharmaceuticals that require nonstandard protocols for procurement, prescribing, handling, dispensing, administration and monitoring.

Specialty pharmaceuticals are radically different from the traditional tablets and other oral medications commonly dispensed at pharmacies. Some of these products treat serious conditions like cancer, HIV/AIDS, hemophilia, hepatitis C, multiple sclerosis, infertility, Crohn's disease, rheumatoid arthritis and growth hormone deficiency.

When a patient takes a specialty drug, they are usually receiving a highly complex medication that has undergone multiple steps in the cultivation process and requires careful administration. Most of them require patients to either go to the physicians office to receive an injectable infusion or they are taught to give themselves injections at home.

The biotech/specialty pharmacy revolution has brought us into an unprecedented phase of disease treatment. Many of the illnesses now treated by biotech drugs were once those that totally eluded successful eradication. The most we could do was to merely treat the symptoms of the disease and try to help patients cope while the disease simply took its course.

Specialty pharmaceuticals, however, are designed to stop disease progression altogether. This has been especially true with conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis and certain types of cancer. These specialty medications also mean that overall costs can be minimized by decreasing the recurrence of doctor visits and hospital stays.

Nevertheless, because specialty medications require more careful handling than traditional medicines, specialty pharmacies have arisen, specifically designed to manage these drugs.

Specialty pharmacies are typically comprised of different teams that concentrate on a particular disease state. The teams are usually comprised of pharmacists and nurses who receive specific training in each area. Within a single specialty pharmacy, it is common to find multiple teams, covering arthritis, cancer, gastrointestinal disorders and other conditions.

So far, this team model has helped to create better expertise and continuity of care by giving patients access to professionals who are expertly trained to handle their condition and answer questions unique to their disease.

Similarly, patient compliance with treatment protocols has increased while the added, personal monitoring of their condition helps to minimize adverse effects in the process.

As the specialty pharmacy revolution continues, more amazing advancements in patient care are emerging. Right now, oral medications for multiple sclerosis are being perfected, helping to increase compliance and create an easier treatment plan.

Various biotech companies are also developing personalized medicine, which involves genetic screening.

This allows for better identification of certain patients' predispositions toward various diseases and the ability to target drug therapies that are more effective in addressing each patient's genetic makeup.

This further confirms the importance and rapidly growing nature of the specialty pharmacy revolution.

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