



Unraveling complexity in specialty care

Although the U.S. has a relatively young population, it has a higher instance of patients with multiple chronic illnesses than 9 other developed nations, according to an international survey.¹ Yet, alarmingly, that same study found many primary care providers feel ill-prepared to care for patients with more than one chronic illness.

This reflects how challenging it is to practice medicine in the U.S. today. Not only are complex care needs particularly difficult to manage from a care coordination perspective, but providers must also navigate additional points of friction along the journey. The health care industry's fragmentation is driving up expenses and impeding access to proactive, appropriate care, even for patients with nonacute needs.²

Health care spending, therefore, continues to rise, with the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) projecting it will reach \$6.2 trillion by 2028.³ Older adults – about 1 in 4 aged 65 and older – are sacrificing spending on food, utilities, clothing or medication due to health care costs, according to a West Health-Gallup study.⁴ More broadly, of U.S. adults in general, 25% of respondents to a recent Kaiser Family Foundation poll said it’s difficult to afford their medications.⁵

“The high cost of health care has become a public health crisis that cuts across all ages as more Americans are delaying – or going without – recommended medical tests and treatments,” said Dr. Zia Agha, chief medical officer at the West Health Institute, the nonprofit medical research organization involved in the West Health-Gallup study.

Unfortunately, patients with complex conditions are particularly vulnerable to these spiraling care costs and industry fragmentation. While managing illness, they are asked to follow multiple complicated regimens, navigate variations in coverage and visit numerous providers for different services. This is concerning in itself, but also results in a frustrating experience for providers and their organizations, whose driving mission is to deliver quality care at the lowest possible cost.

Addressing the challenges of complex care

Eradicating such costly complexity will not be easy to achieve, as it permeates every corner of health care delivery. While many organizations realize change is needed in the industry, it has been difficult cracking the code.

But Optum, an experienced health care services provider and pharmacy benefit manager, is uniquely positioned to solve for this challenge.

One example of how Optum has committed to simplifying complex care is with the recent launch of Optum® Specialty Fusion™. This integrated solution that connects medical and pharmacy benefits into a single prior authorization platform to maximize specialty management strategies at the point of care. Built to break down silos, the solution then evaluates hundreds of factors influencing specialty pharmacy cost in real-time and determines the most clinically appropriate and cost-effective pathway for each patient.

“We want to make sure we’re focusing the most energy and attention on patients with the greatest need,” said Peter Demogenes, senior vice president of product at Optum. “That’s why, with Specialty Fusion, we’re starting with the hardest part of the health care process. Some of the biggest challenges in the industry at large (are) exacerbated in specialty care because it’s the most complex.”

When it comes to specialty pharmacy in particular, stakeholders are juggling various challenges. Despite accounting for just 2% of overall prescription volume, specialty medications now make up 53% of total annual pharmacy spending.⁶ Health plans are left to manage these rapidly rising costs, with specialty plan spend projected to increase to \$505 billion by 2023.⁷ At the same time, providers are stuck handling increased volumes of prior authorizations on top of more complex treatments.

“Health plans require certain drugs, especially within the specialty space, to be pre-approved before they’re dispensed. This is because they want to ensure these medications are as cost effective as possible, and are right for the patient,” Demogenes said.

Unfortunately, this can cause delays in treatment for the patient and higher out-of-pocket expenses. In a doctor’s office specifically, the way it plays out is troubling, according to Shawna Gisch, CEO of Optum Health Solutions.



1 in 4

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One of the most difficult things a patient can experience, she explained, is having a specialist recommend a new treatment or drug proven to improve quality of life or longevity for patients with a similar diagnosis, only for the office to call days later with news that they aren't approved for that treatment, or it would have prohibitively high out-of-pocket costs. It is a crushing situation for patients who are already battling the stress and pain of illness.

"You're so excited because you feel like you've gotten answers, and then you get stuck," Gisch said.

This is why Specialty Fusion's ability to quickly deliver relevant and accurate information to providers at the point of care is game-changing. It looks at how effective treatments were for patients with similar diagnoses and health factors, and makes a recommendation to the provider based off of this information.

"With Fusion, we can look across both medical and pharmacy benefits – in real time at the point of care – to establish the most clinically appropriate, cost-effective treatment for a patient," Gisch said. "If there is a biosimilar that has the exact same outcomes but at a much lower cost... (or) if there is a regimen that isn't evidence-based that a provider is trying to get through, it will present that."

And because Specialty Fusion strategically brings together functions from Optum health services, pharmaceuticals and data insights, it is able to guide the provider to the ideal decision. Instead of getting in the way of care delivery, the solution removes barriers to effective, quality care.

For example, if a physician prescribes a specialty medication and isn't sure whether to use the medical benefit or the pharmacy benefit, which often happens with specialty medications, Specialty Fusion will assess which benefit is optimal in terms of both quality and cost. It also effectively streamlines the prior authorization process. In fact, in most cases, providers can complete requests for prior authorization and receive approval in under 10 minutes, according to Demogenes.

"Internally, we have evolved those processes so that they're very simplistic," Demogenes said. "They're as simple as a point and click for the provider."

The front-line benefit to the patient comes in the form of reduced time to therapy. Using Specialty Fusion, providers can help patients gain 50% faster access to therapy,⁸ which can improve their overall experience and potentially their outcomes. And, considering that specialty medications can be extremely expensive, looking at all the different options available with comparable effectiveness has the potential to generate substantial cost savings for everyone involved.

"Specialty Fusion helps to curb rising health plan expenses, as well as providing some comfort from a patient perspective," Demogenes said. "They're going to be able to get the care they need, at a more affordable cost."

With research showing that 20% of cancer patients skip a portion of their medication due to cost,⁹ Optum realizes the potential large-scale impact of reducing medical and pharmacy spend. The real-time insights offered through Specialty Fusion allow providers to see coverage recommendations and select clinically appropriate treatment alternatives that reduce the financial burden for patients who utilize the health care system the most. The same information is presented to health plans as well.

"It reduces cost for the system by evaluating all of the value levers across (benefits), it simplifies and consolidates the prior authorization process and approval timeline for providers, and then it makes it simpler for them to get patients onto treatment as soon as possible," said Erin Satterwhite, president of Optum® Frontier Therapies.



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Optum differentiators and future roadmap

As one of the first solutions Optum is bringing to market to bring simplicity to complex health care, Specialty Fusion certainly won't be the last.

To streamline care delivery, every program Optum launches is shaped by input from consumers and providers, with success ultimately tied to outcomes. And rather than trying to simplify already complex health care business functions – an exercise in futility, in most cases – Optum is building new solutions with simplicity embedded from day one.

“Our North Star is to make the health care system work better for everyone, and reducing complexity is at the core of that.” said Satterwhite. “(You start by putting) yourself in the shoes of the people you are trying to serve.”

By focusing on the end-user to drive transformation, Optum is realizing solutions that offer a meaningful impact, according to Demogenes.

“We've done a lot of work to streamline and improve our programs, with very good results – high NPS provider satisfaction scores, and very good feedback from our customers and patients,” he said. “Our average NPS scores across our provider-facing programs: are in the 60s to low 70s.”¹⁰

These measures of success are impressive, given that scores above 60 are rare for health care companies. But the metrics are also crucial from a compliance perspective, as entities such as CMS are increasing their focus on experience measures. One example is using consumer experience-related data to inform how health plans are reimbursed for members, according to Gisch.

With state Medicaid agencies and other governing bodies reinforcing the need for seamless engagement in health care, she said, “there's increasing financial incentive and business incentive around improving experience – even more so than there has been in the past.”

With Specialty Fusion, Optum is making great strides in simplifying what it considers to be one of the most challenging parts of the health care system. These changes will position health plans and providers to deliver high-quality, affordable care in ways previously untenable yet imperative for future success. But this is only the start.



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Once it has its arms around simplicity in complex care, Demogenes said, “We'll replicate that for every part of the health care process.”

Peter Demogenes,
Optum Health

To learn more, contact your Optum Representative today or visit us at www.optum.com.

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