

WVRx - Aging With Grace & Dignity – 02/06/08
By Suzanne Higgins

Suzanne Higgins: Next – the debut of West Virginia RX – a paperless, electronic system for dispensing donated pharmaceuticals to WV's uninsured, working poor. That's about 300,000 of our citizens and it's a program sought by the state medical association and other patient advocates for years. Partners say it will mean better health - and a savings of hundreds of millions of dollars annually.

Now there are many free drug programs sponsored by drug companies and available to the low income and uninsured – they're called individual Patient Assistance Programs. You may remember celebrity Montel Williams visiting Charleston in a huge bus last year, promoting this kind of assistance. Although they help thousands, these programs can mean a nightmare of paperwork for the provider and the patient, 5-6 week-waits in the processing and delivery of those meds, and then extra trips for the patient to pick up those drugs once delivered to the physician's office. In addition, the paperwork must be filed over and over again for each patient.

But over time a relationship has been forged between drug companies and certain facilities that serve large populations of the poor. So for a few years now Drug companies have been providing medications in bulk to this population through several state hospitals and the state's 10 free clinics, like Beckley Healthright. 33-year-old Lisa sat in the free clinic's waiting room on a recent snowy morning, her knee in a cast. Lisa lives with several chronic illnesses -and recently had knee surgery after falling in her home. ..

Lisa: I just saw the orthopedic and I had to come and get some prescriptions filled

Higgins: Can you tell us what would it mean if you could not get your prescriptions here?

Lisa: I can honestly say if it were not for the services these people offer here, and I not having any insurance I don't know exactly what I would do. If I had to pay for them myself, and looking at the price tags that they have on the bags, I just don't know how I would be able to afford all of it.

Higgins: Lisa receives her medicine thru what's called Institutional Patient Assistant Programs. The drug companies ship in bulk to the clinic, the clinic in turn can fill a doctor's prescription and dispense the medicine to the patient immediately. It's this bulk shipping, central-fill pharmacy system that is expanding statewide under the name WVRx – and WV Healthright, a free clinic in Charleston, is taking the lead. Pat White is administrator and says it's an on-line system for all of WV's prescription-writing providers.

White: It's going to be like a mail order pharmacy - a provider will get in, log on, fill out the form, they can e-prescribe right online. We think we can actually fill the prescription once we have the pieces in place, you know the proof of income, and the prescription and the intake part, within 24 hours. And the process is going to be pretty seamless and easy for the provider and patient to navigate throughwe want to put providers in touch with the medications.

Higgins: The website will provide a comprehensive drug formulary – a list of all available donated pharmaceuticals – all providers may consider when writing prescriptions.

White: It should be exciting to anyone out there, if they're a business person paying insurance premiums, if they're a patient that is in need of this medication, if it's a prescriber who is in need of medication for their patients that they can't afford and they know that, it's good for government, (it's a real public private partnership that's pulling this off and it's very exciting. And it's going to save the lives of the people in WV that can't afford medications.

Higgins: WVRx is a public-private partnership among the governor's office, the state medical association, the state hospital association, The Attorney General's office, the WV Association of Free Clinics, drug manufactures and others. Again Pat White, Administrator of WV Healthright in Charleston.

White: We're going to be the first free clinic to take on this kind of a statewide project. It's the first nationally that's going to be a paperless system. Even if we get a paper prescription, that's faxed to us or brought to us, or sent to us in the mail, we will scan that and put that into the patient's record, It's the first of it's type like that in the country, there are some other states that have taken on this kind of effort, but it's not been the same way that we're doing it and none of them are paperless, so it's saving time, that's what our effort is, we want to think smarter and not harder.
It's really exciting.

Higgins: The medications available will be for chronic illnesses such as diabetes, asthma, hypertension, high blood pressure, depression, and heart disease. The uninsured patient must have an annual income no more than 200% of the federal poverty level, which currently, is about \$18,000 for a single person, and \$40,000 for a family of 4. The patient will pay a minimal annual fee of \$30. Dr. Wayne Spiggle of Mineral County is one of the architect's of WVRx, and a long-time advocate for the uninsured.

Spiggle: I'm hoping this will be a short-lived program because we won't need it. No other developed country in the world needs a West Virginia Healthright, and it's a shame and a national disgrace that we do, having said that I am very appreciate and optimistic that the people who have come forward to help us do this will make a statewide program to more efficiently dispense medications donated by our collaborators the drug manufactures a success in WV.

Higgins: Funding for WVRx is coming from the state, the Heinz Family Philanthropies and the Benedum Foundation. And while operating costs are estimated at \$600,000 a year, the WV Hospital Association estimates WVRx will save \$365M annually in uncompensated care, which ultimately gets cost-shifted to those *with* insurance. Again, Dr. Wayne Spiggle:

Spiggle: It has been proven that if you keep a patient with a chronic disease connected to the medication, that patient goes to the emergency room forty percent less often, and out of those patients there are 70% less hospitalizations, keep in mind that these are our neighbors who can't afford to be sick, they have no insurance, so when they have to go to the emergency room or the hospital they can't afford to pay that bill, so they become part of that statistic of uncompensated care.

Higgins: WVRx.org will be up and running within the next few weeks. Wheeling Jesuit University's National Technology Transfer Center is designing and maintaining the website. WV Healthright will receive the bulk shipments and mail the medications directly to the patients homes, and Beckley Healthright will process all prescription applications. In addition, Beckley Healthright will manage a clearing house function of the website. Jeff Graham is administrator.

Graham: Drug manufacturers have already exhibited the willingness to help our state's uninsured, we just now have to try to channel all this energy in a more efficient process, that's what its' all about, let's make it more efficient. If it's not available thru the WVRx and we get a contact or a patient provider that needs that med we'll do everything we can from this point to steer that patient to put that drug in that patient's hand. If it means, let's say the med is available thru a regular Patient Assistance Application, there are retail programs that we may steer patients to, so that's part of what the clearing house is.

Higgins: Another part of the clearing house function will be to match patients who have no primary care provider with a free clinic or community health center in their area – which should cut down on costly, uncompensated emergency room visits.

Graham: These resources many times are available on line, the whole thing we're trying to bring them under one roof, to at least have an agency pointing everybody in this direction or down a path that they should travel to get help.

Higgins: Graham refers to some of the middle aged patients he greeted earlier in his waiting room....

Graham: As we age our bodies tend to break down. As we age we need more healthcare, we need more screenings. We need to have access to prescription medications for our chronic conditions. These are

things people live with, and without medications as we reach this 50-60, before Medicare, if we don't have these medications that can help, in many cases we are really lessening our quality of life, and shortening lives.

Higgins: Lonzo Ross is in the Beckley Healthright clinic this morning, grateful for the care.

Ross: I'm 54 years old, I'm a diabetic patient, and these people take really good care of me, considering I don't have any income. I have neuropathy in my feet; that's the main problem I have with my diabetes. They give me everything I need here. I take actose, I take glucatharig.

Higgins: Can you tell me what it would be like for you were you not able to get those free medications thru the clinic?

Ross: I don't know (*laughs*) It's been like a Godsend, ever since. I know I wouldn't be able to afford it....

Higgins: Again Administrator of Beckley Healthright, Jeff Graham.

Graham: I like to quote Mark Twain: "Victory is not won in miles but inches. You win a little bit, stand your ground, you win a little bit more." We're doing everything we can to reach more and more people a little bit at a time, it's exciting, it's a blessing.

Studio wrap: WVRx has started a marketing campaign and plans to test the program and hold demonstrations in several providers offices - with plans to be fully functioning by the end of this month

I'm Suzanne Higgins and you're listening to Aging with Grace And Dignity on West Virginia Public Radio.