

New Care Management Opportunities in Consumer-Driven Health Care

By Catherine M. Mullahy, RN, BS, CRRN, CCM

America's health care is undergoing a major transformation. The shift began a decade ago when employers, weary of the high costs of health care, began shifting some of the burden to their employees. That trend gave rise to consumer-driven health care plans which, in turn, not only shifted some of the costs, but also more of the decision making to consumers. Insurance companies too recognized the value in consumers being more vested in their health care and thus created new health care plan options such as health savings accounts (HSAs), health reimbursement accounts, and hybrids of these plans. Last, but not least, under the current administration, health care reform has finally been ushered in with the passage of The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA) earlier this year. While there are still some fine points of the PPACA being debated in Congress, it is already clear from its content that all parties along the health care continuum—employers and other

Catherine M. Mullahy, RN, BS, CRRN, CCM, is President of Mullahy & Associates, LLC (www.mullahyassociates.com). Catherine is a 35-year health care industry veteran, widely recognized as a pioneer in "Best in Class" case management and entrepreneurial case management. This year, the Case Management Society of America acknowledged her many contributions to case management with its Lifetime Achievement Award.

plan sponsors, insurance and managed care companies, health care providers, and consumers—will be affected.

This new law, coupled with the shift in health care plans, and other market trends have created a health care landscape just ripe with opportunities for entrepreneurial, direct-to-consumer (DTC) care managers. The opportunities exist for care managers to: (1) become a much-needed community-based resource for consumers, (2) realize greater professional fulfillment, and (3) carve out a new career that has built-in flexibility and infinite income potential. The first steps for those care managers who see themselves in this role is to gain a better understanding of the changes and the heightened, corresponding role of the care manager.

Consumer-Driven Health Care

Since their inception in 2000, consumer-driven health care (CDH) plans have been increasing steadily. In 2007, 4.5 million Americans were covered by these plans. By 2008, the number had jumped to 6 million. Today, based on the January 2010 Census as reported by the AHIP Center for Policy and Research, there are now an estimated 10 million people covered by HSAs/high-deductible health plans. In case you're wondering what have been the effects of these plans, consider these findings from the American Academy of Actuaries' May 2009 Emerging Data on Consumer-Driven

Health Plans report:

- CDH plans are having a favorable effect.
- CDH plans are effecting savings of as much as 10% to 12% in their first year, and their costs are growing at a rate of 3% to 5% lower than traditional PPO plans in subsequent years.
- There is an increase in preventive services by CDH plan participants.
- There is a higher incidence of physicians following evidence-based care protocols with CDH plan participants.

That's all good news that suggests CDH plans will continue to grow. The only potential flies in the ointment are some new rules and regulations presented by the PPACA that could make compliance difficult for high deductible health plans. This situation is still to be determined.

What we can be certain of is that consumers, charged with more decision making and who are more interested in the cost of health care and their various treatment options, will need an experienced health care professional to guide them and help them make informed decisions. A relevant finding of the Deloitte Center for Health Solutions' 2010 Survey of Health Care Consumers is that only 23% of consumers believe they understand how the health care system works. Helping the majority gain greater insight and access the best care is an ideal role for case managers with the right skills and commitment to serving in a DTC case management practice. ►

Patients, who may be intimidated by their physicians and therefore avoid asking them for a proper explanation, could benefit enormously from having a DTC case manager to fulfill the important role of educator.

More HealthCare Consumers

Along with those individuals who already have health coverage and will need a case manager's assistance are the many more consumers who will now be covered as a provision of the new legislation. This includes dependents up to age 26 years of individuals who are currently covered by a plan, individuals with preexisting conditions previously excluded from coverage, and the many Americans who simply could not previously afford health care. Even before they become covered, as they begin joining the health care exchanges and start comparison shopping for their coverage, these consumers will require the counsel of a professional who can help them evaluate key criteria. Going forward, they will be in need of case managers' support in navigating the health care delivery system.

The 2010 Survey of Health Care Consumers reported that, "Americans without insurance are least informed about how the US health care system works." The survey also reports what many already knew, which is that uninsured consumers are less inclined to have routine checkups or seek care for acute illnesses or chronic conditions.

Changing Demographics

Let's also remember that our nation's people are becoming increasingly more multicultural and living longer with higher incidence of age-related conditions. There is also a pronounced increase in certain other conditions across our population such as diabetes, obesity, and hypertension.

Next year, there will be 77 million baby boomers turning 65 years old. By

2020, the average life expectancy is projected to be 100 years plus. It does not take a mathematical genius to recognize that there will be more health care consumers in need of more services in the years ahead.

America's population is also changing with growing multiculturalism evident everywhere including within our health care systems. Hospitals are now routinely providing information in English and Spanish to reflect the increasing Hispanic population. There are also many other ethnic groups who make up our melting pot nation, each of whom brings cultural nuances to the health care experience that need to be addressed. Here again, DTC case managers, who understand these ethnocentric beliefs, can be extremely valuable in helping those individuals gain access to health care, make the right choices, and follow their prescribed treatment plans.

Beyond the language and cultural barriers for which some patients need help, there are medical technologies and terminologies that present challenges for Americans of all backgrounds. On the technology side, keeping up with the latest technologies is difficult even for medical practitioners. The many acronyms used in health care, from MRIs and CT scans to EKGs, require explanations—not just of the terms, but what the test or procedure involves.

The US Department of Education conducts a national survey to gauge the public's health literacy every 10 years. The last published survey in 2003 found that 78 million Americans or 36% of American adults have only basic or below basic health literacy skills and 5% could not even be tested because they lacked

the skills to participate in the survey at all. There are certain groups within the population that are especially vulnerable to health literacy problems, including the elderly who lose some cognitive and physical functionality, minority and immigrant groups, low income groups with lower education, and those with chronic medical or physical conditions hindering their ability to learn or gain access to information. Regardless of the circumstance of one's health literacy problems, the need for help in understanding different medical terms or procedures is vital. Patients, who may be intimidated by their physicians and therefore avoid asking them for a proper explanation, could benefit enormously from having a DTC case manager to fulfill the important role of educator.

Other Market Conditions

Beyond expanding consumer-driven health care, legislative reform, changing demographics, rapidly advanced medical technologies, and health care literacy issues, the current health care landscape also presents other conditions that are driving the need for DTC case management. Chief among them are:

- Decreasing number of hospitals
- Increasing home care utilization
- Increasing number of doctors retiring
- Increasing shortage of health care professionals including doctors and nurses
- Increasing medical tourism
- Increasing outsourcing of medical care management consulting
- Increasing use of case managers by physicians and medical groups

Collectively, all of these factors have set the stage for a new and expanded

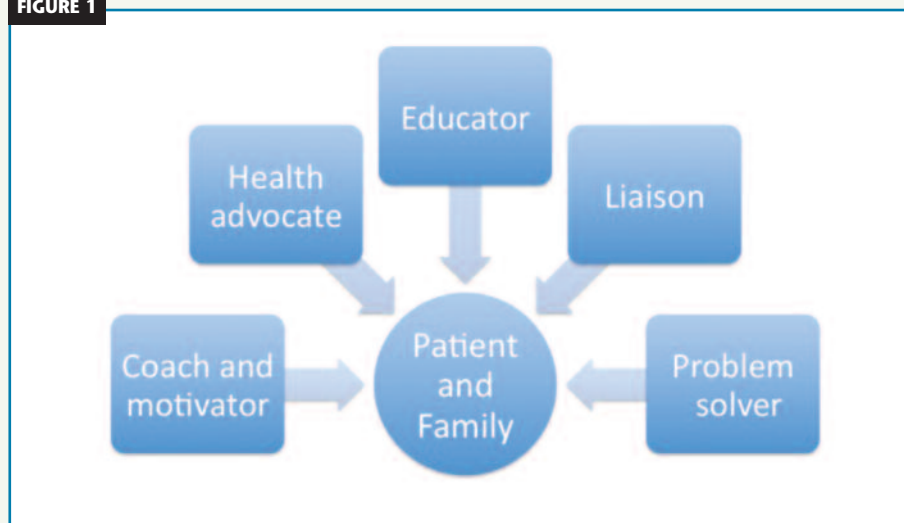
role of case managers. It is a role that many case managers, based on the feedback often heard from these unsung heroes of the health care system, would welcome.

DTC Community-Based Case Management

Unfortunately, many case managers have far less direct patient contact in their current positions than they would like. In many settings, the role has become more paper intensive than patient intensive. Those aspects of nursing and care management that attracted many professionals to the role to begin with have, in many instances, been relegated to a secondary position. DTC case management places the focus right back on the patient where it belongs.

Independent case managers serving in this role can truly create a practice in which they can fully nurture and care for a patient and develop long-term, fulfilling relationships with them as well as their family members and caretakers. They can serve in the role of health advocate, educator, problem solver, and liaison with the patient's other medical team members—doctors, pharmacists, hospitals, insurance company, and others (Figure 1). The DTC case manager can be the individual who helps a patient receive the right information and explanation about a medical condition and treatment plan, encourages patients to follow their doctors' orders, and provides coaching and motivation for adhering to vital preventive measures. For caretakers of chronically ill individuals, the DTC case manager can be a tremendous support, providing guidance, assisting with the care management responsibilities, and instilling greater confidence, peace of mind, and balance in their lives. Additionally, the case manager can assist patients and their financial advisors in accessing medical records and clarifying health care information and related cost factors so that the advisors can develop a viable

FIGURE 1



health and wealth management plan.

Preventing Costly Patient Readmission

There is one more area where DTC case managers will be needed. It is in the reduction of preventable hospital readmissions. The PPACA mandates reductions in Medicare payments for preventable readmissions, giving hospitals an added incentive for better managing the follow-up care of recently discharged patients. In particular, there are certain groups of patients who are most likely to be readmitted in what would be classified a "preventable readmission." These patients include those discharged after surgery and those with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, certain cardiac conditions, and/or congestive heart failure. With the support of a DTC case manager, many of these patients would be better able to properly follow their postdischarge treatment plans and therefore not be susceptible to a setback requiring their readmission. These individuals too benefit from the DTC case manager advocating for them and serving as a liaison with their other medical team members.

Where Do You Fit in?

For many case managers, making the

transition to a DTC case management practice—whether serving independently in a community-based practice, in a physician's office, as part of a hospital discharge planning team, or in a corporate or union setting—requires a thorough personal assessment. Case managers must ask themselves questions such as:

- Where would I best fit in?
- Do I have what it takes to be in business for myself?
- Is this the right time in my career and life to have more flexibility with my schedule and caseload?
- Do I want to change my earning power and perhaps earn more as an entrepreneurial case manager rather than as a case management employee?
- Do I want a role that will give me more direct interaction with patients?

In addition to really being honest with themselves about what they want and where they are best suited to serve, case managers who want to fill the role of DTC case manager need to be willing to make the investment necessary in their continuing education to learn best practices and business skills, apply tools, and generally develop their expertise and capabilities so that they can effectively fulfill this vital role. **CEU**

Exam starts on page 16