How a Little-Known Federal Prescription Price Control Program Is Helping Thousands In Our Communities

By Erin Armstrong, Manager, Community Benefits

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It’s 4:30pm on a Friday, and a physician calls the Health Assistance Program directly and says, “Is there any way we can get this patient medication today? Otherwise, I have to send him to the ED to be admitted.” The patient would need to go in the hospital, all because he can’t afford his medication. A medication thousands of times cheaper than his hospital stay will be. A medication that, if he could afford it, he could get and avoid seeing his doctor as often because he would be doing better…

“Yes, we can do that,” I say. “We can get him medications at no cost to him. And he can pick them up today.”

It’s the right thing to do, and thanks to the University of Vermont Health Network’s decision to invest in a prescription assistance program, it’s the easy thing to do.

For this patient and thousands of others, it is possible to make that happen because of our Network’s enrollment in a federal prescription medication price control program called “340B.” I learned about what 340B was when I began working with the Health Assistance Program (HAP) at the UVM Health Network in 2017. HAP partners with our pharmacy to offer medications at no cost to qualifying patients thanks to our participation in the 340B program, which allows our hospitals to buy prescription drugs at a discounted rate. As a Network, we have chosen to invest those savings into our prescription assistance program, allowing us to stretch resources to help low- and middle-income patients access medications.

Medication is prevention. Access to much-needed medications keeps people well, saving them money, and improving their health and quality of life. It keeps them out of the Emergency Department and out of the hospital, saving the health care system’s resources and increasing access for others. Who wouldn’t want to keep people well and keep costs down?

I am proud of what we have been able to do at the UVM Health Network through our HAP program, thanks to 340B. I think about all of the stories I have heard from the people who are enrolled in HAP. HAP staff frequently hear “life-changing” and “a burden has been lifted” when recipients learn they do not have to stress about paying for their medication. Sometimes, patients call back after they’ve received their free medications because they really did think it was too good to be true! I hear how they can afford to buy their grandbaby a gift now that they don’t spend 50 percent of their income on medications. I hear how they won’t get “their lights shut off” anymore. They won’t have to choose between food and medication.
If you are a low- or middle-income patient living within the service area of the UVM Health Network – from Malone, N.Y., to Berlin, Vt., and all the communities between – and you need help paying for your prescriptions, I urge you to email HealthAssistanceProgram@UVMHealth.org or call (802) 847-6984 (toll-free 1-888-739-5183) today to learn whether you are eligible to enroll in HAP.