

Exploring the frontiers of pharmacy in Montana

At the clinic and in private practice, Carla Cobb, PharmD, offers comprehensive medication reviews to her patients



PHOTO CREDIT: RIVERSTONE TONY SMITH PHOTOGRAPHY

THE AREA around Billings, MT, is steeped in history. The former railroad town has close ties to historical figures such as George Armstrong Custer, who fought against a coalition of Native American tribes in the nearby Battle of Little Bighorn;

the famous Wild West frontierswoman and one-time resident Calamity Jane; and William Clark of the Lewis and Clark expedition, the first transcontinental journey to the Pacific Coast, who traveled through the region in 1806 and inscribed his name on a rock formation just west of the city.

Today, Montana-based psychiatric pharmacist Carla Cobb, PharmD, is making a bit of history herself. About 2 years ago, she implemented an innovative comprehensive medication review program for patients at the RiverStone Health Clinic in Billings, a federally qualified community health center where she is the only pharmacist who offers this type of medication therapy management (MTM) service. Last year, in collaboration with three pharmacist colleagues, Cobb launched AssessRx, a private practice aimed at providing comprehensive medication management consultations to patients with mental illness.

For Cobb, a comprehensive medication review is about empowering patients to take control of their own health care. "It is important to educate patients about their medications and put it back on them to help them advocate for themselves," said Cobb. "The more patients I meet with, the more I realize how many people are not reaching their goals. Whether it is depression that is not in remission or cholesterol levels that aren't under control, a pharmacist can help patients by providing this unique medication review service."

At RiverStone Health, a collection of four family practice primary care clinics in Montana, Cobb is part of a collaborative health team that cares for patients with mental illness. The integration of primary care physicians, therapists, addiction counselors, and pharmacy is what "makes our practice ... unique," said Cobb.

"I often help [physicians] manage things they may not think about, like the pharmacology of the medication, the pharmacokinetics, and the drug interactions," she explained. "What I do is different from what the behavioral health person does or what the physician is doing. Pharmacists can make a unique contribution because we have special education and training in medications."

Meeting about medications

Although patients may initially see a primary care provider at the RiverStone Health Clinic for their medical needs, Cobb will often meet with them as well to conduct a comprehensive medication review.

"Typically, patients are referred to me by a physician if the patient has problems with their medications, if they are confused about what they are supposed to be taking, or if the patient is seeing a number of different physicians," Cobb told *Pharmacy Today*. "Sometimes patients are on a lot of different medications and they have concerns about drug interactions."

Patients are scheduled for hour-long medication review appointments, during which they are asked to bring in all of their medication, including OTC products such as vitamins, creams, or eye drops. "I am looking for indication for use, effectiveness, safety issues, and adherence," Cobb said. "I want to make sure patients are on what they are supposed to be on [and] that it is safe and effective, and I also want to reinforce adherence to a good medication regimen."

In addition to providing better patient care and improving outcomes, Cobb believes a comprehensive medication review can also help reduce health care costs. "Perhaps there are less expensive alternative medications, or if the patient is on a large number of medications, I often end up recommending that the patient reduce or stop a medication because it may no longer be effective," she said.

In addition to conducting comprehensive medication reviews, Cobb also teaches approximately 12 student pharmacists a year at the RiverStone Health Clinic. "The students help me provide comprehensive medication reviews," she said, "and these [sessions] help expose the students to that type of pharmacy role."

MTM in private practice

Cobb spends roughly 3 days a week at the RiverStone Health Clinic. The rest of her time is dedicated to AssessRx,

"I sit down with the patients for an hour and do a comprehensive medication review. I also request the patient's records so we can get the labs ... in order to assess whether they are meeting their goals," said Cobb. "I usually have the patient come back in a few weeks and we go over my recommendations together." Cobb's recommendations are also sent to the patient's physician.

"My favorite part is meeting with the patients and being able to listen to their stories," Cobb told *Today*. "They ... appreciate that I am able to take the time to sit down and really listen to their con-



bold not bold

cerns."

Cobb recently met with a patient who was seeing a number of specialists and felt that she was taking too many medications. "This patient found out about my service, and she and her husband said that they had been looking for someone like me for years," explained Cobb. "She said that every doctor she went to added a new medication, but she felt that no one ever really looked at how all of her medications worked together or if she really needed all the meds."

Cobb performed a comprehensive evaluation of the patient's medications, educated her about the entire regimen, and identified one medication that could be contributing to adverse effects she was experiencing. "Together we came up with a plan for talking to the patient's doctors about how she could start reducing some of her meds," Cobb said.

Educating patients, providers

The idea for AssessRx originated with a Montana program that provides funding for comprehensive medication reviews conducted by pharmacists. The program was slow to catch on, explained Cobb, "because pharmacists were having trouble carving out time in their day [and] in their busy practices to be able to provide this kind of service."

Cobb and her pharmacist colleagues, Maria Erickson, PharmD, Miranda Dickson, PharmD, and Jarrod Willems,



bold not bold



bold not bold

BSP Pharm, decided to join forces.. They determined that if they wanted to make the MTM service successful, they would need to have separate practice and office spaces where they could offer comprehensive medication reviews.

In April 2011, Cobb and her colleagues received further funding—a 19-month grant awarded through a competitive application and review process from the Montana Mental Health Trust. “One of the major goals of the trust is to educate primary care providers about the appropriate use of psychiatric medications, so we fit the criteria very well, which helped us get the grant,” said Cobb. “On a patient-by-patient basis, we are educating providers so they can do a better job of taking care of all patients with mental illness.” Cobb and her colleagues received one of the largest grants in the state—the 8th largest out of 59 grants awarded, worth about 4% of the total trust awarded to date.

Running a business

A year and a half after opening its doors, AssessRx is a successful practice, but like any new business, there were some bumps along the way. One of the biggest challenges, noted Cobb, was convincing patients and health professionals that comprehensive medication reviews are a worthwhile service.

“I am convinced, and there is no doubt in my mind that [comprehensive medication reviews] are a useful and worthwhile service,” Cobb told *Today*. “But it has been difficult trying to convince physicians of that and getting them to refer patients to us.

“There has also been some resistance on the part of the patients,” Cobb added. “When I take a moment to describe the services I have to offer, patients say things like, ‘Well, my pharmacist already does that.’”

Cobb tells patients that in a pharmacy, pharmacists are screening for drug interactions and making sure patients understand medication administration instructions. Those pharmacy consultations are not as in-depth as the service she provides, she said.

“I assure patients that we are not there to criticize their physicians,” Cobb explained. “At AssessRx, we can take our time and focus on patients’ medications, as opposed to the physician, whose focus is on making a diagnosis and ordering labs and diagnostic imaging. Our focus as pharmacists is solely on the best use of medications.”

Getting the word out

Cobb pointed out that a marketing component is necessary for any sort of new pharmacy service. “First, you have to figure out how what you do is unique and important, and then you have to figure out how to communicate that to physicians and patients,” she said. “Pharmacists need to establish a service that is different from what patients get from either their doctor or their community pharmacy.”

Taking it a step farther, Cobb said that, in general, pharmacists “desperately need some public relations efforts to get the word out to the public about our extensive training and knowledge and to increase the demand for pharmacist services.”

Pharmacy services such as comprehensive medication reviews are important for all patients, but medication management is especially critical for those patients with mental illness such as depression, bipolar disorder, or anxiety disorders. Cobb believes that all pharmacists should be knowledgeable about mental illnesses and their treatment options and comfortable with treating patients with these conditions.

“There is still a lot of stigma associated with [mental illness], even among pharmacists, and this is something we need to work to alleviate so that these [patients] get the help they need and deserve,” she said.

—Amy K. Erickson



bold not bold