



## Making the Business Case for Hiring an Oncology Pharmacist

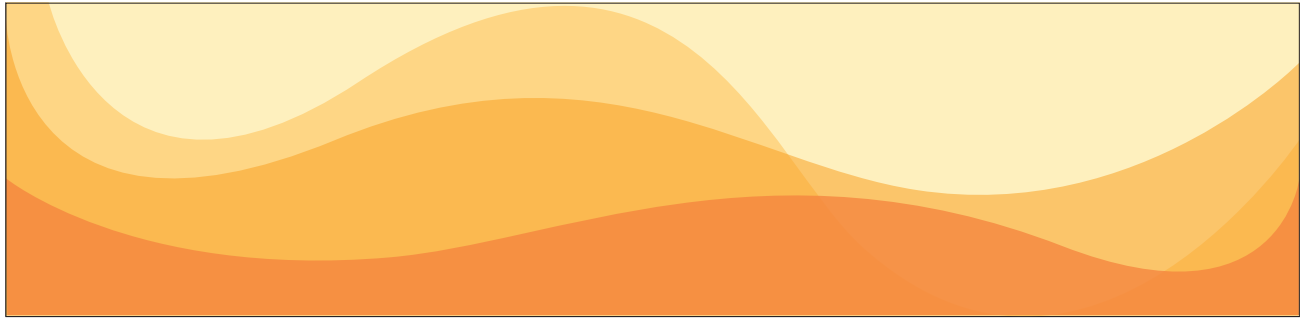
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The Hematology/Oncology Pharmacy Association (HOPA) describes oncology pharmacy practice as encompassing a “broad range of expertise and levels of practice, skill, and responsibilities.”<sup>1</sup> A comprehensive detailing of the evolving role of oncology pharmacists is provided in “Further Defining the Scope of Hematology/Oncology Pharmacy Practice,” published by HOPA in 2019.<sup>2</sup> Licensed oncology pharmacists may have responsibility for interpreting, evaluating, and implementing medication orders; dispensing and administering prescribed drugs; drug utilization review; medication-related research; medication therapy management; patient education and counseling; inventory management and safe storage; and direct patient care through participation in collaborative practice agreements, among other duties.<sup>1,2</sup> Across the oncology ecosystem, licensed oncology pharmacists are team members in the delivery of quality care—in the inpatient clinical setting, ambulatory outpatient clinic, infusion center, specialty pharmacy, practice management, and clinical research.<sup>2</sup> In the context of

costly cancer therapies, “the oncology pharmacist is often a clinician who understands both the clinical and financial components” of patient care.<sup>1</sup>

### THE PROBLEM

The Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) Triple Aim challenges healthcare organizations to strive for an enhanced patient experience while reducing costs and maintaining quality.<sup>3</sup> As knowledge of the biology underlying the many diseases comprising cancer expands, practice-changing advances in diagnosis and treatment continue to accelerate. More patients are diagnosed with more nuanced disease and, in many cases, are living longer and experiencing an improved quality of life due to new therapies and approaches to treating cancers. These include new classes of drugs, combination therapies (doublet, triplet, quadruplet), immunotherapies with checkpoint inhibitors, targeted therapies with companion diagnostics, CAR T-cell therapies, and for some disease types, multiple sequential lines of therapy. As treatments for cancer have grown in number, complexity, and cost, U.S. demographics have continued to shift. Over the past decade, the number of individuals over age 65 has increased by more than one-third (34.2 percent); by 2030 all of the baby boomer generation will be older than 65.<sup>4,5</sup> The oncology community is aware of the approaching “perfect storm”—increased patient volumes, projected shortage of medical oncologists, more complex treatment regimens, and unsustainably high costs of care. As value-based payment becomes predominant, cancer programs and practices must implement new care delivery models. Oncology pharmacists are the health practitioners with training and skills that include the operational, clinical, and financial aspects of cancer care. As such, oncology pharmacists play an integral role in today’s complex, dynamic cancer care delivery environment.



## THE SOLUTION

Oncology pharmacists bring to clinical teams needed support for the management of patient symptoms and comorbidities to improve patient care and quality of life. With knowledge of therapeutics, pharmacology, and drug interactions, clinical oncology pharmacists can provide “management of pain, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, anemia, depression, and other symptoms” for patients with cancer throughout the care continuum.<sup>1</sup> Where collaboration between pharmacy and revenue cycle teams exists, oncology pharmacists can be instrumental in ensuring that pharmacy workflows and operations optimize drug procurement and value-based contracts. Oncology pharmacists are a key clinical resource for cancer program financial navigators seeking to lessen the financial burden and ensure access to treatment for patients—by answering clinical questions to secure prior authorizations and overcome denials. (See case studies below.)

A growing body of evidence supports the value and versatility of oncology pharmacists in cancer care. In “Demonstrating the Value of the Oncology Pharmacist within the Health Care Team,” Eve M. Segal and colleagues present results of a systematic literature review spanning 1951 to 2018.<sup>6</sup> The study examined existing research focused on measuring the value and impact of oncology pharmacists in the areas of patient satisfaction, improvement in medical safety, improvement in quality care and outcomes, economics, and intervention acceptance. Of the more than 400 papers identified, 66 met the study criteria, demonstrating the value of oncology pharmacists in four areas: clinical care, patient education, informatics, and cost savings.

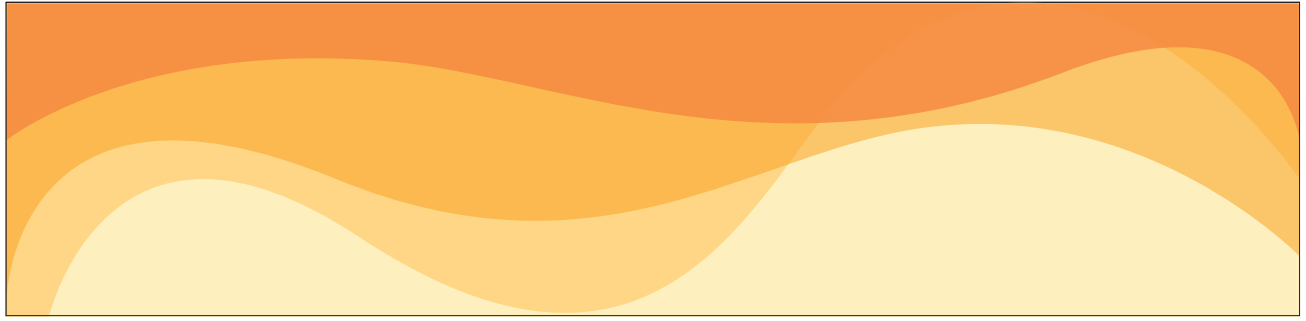
One example of oncology pharmacist versatility is through participation in a collaborative practice agreement. These agreements “create formal relationships between pharmacists and physicians or other providers. Collaborative practice agreements define certain patient care functions that a pharmacist can autonomously provide under specified situations

and conditions.”<sup>7</sup> Through this type of agreement, oncology pharmacists can extend their clinical expertise to conduct patient assessments, order drug-therapy-related lab tests, administer drugs, and under a defined protocol select, initiate, monitor, and adjust drug regimens.

Oncology pharmacists lead and participate in medically integrated pharmacy models. One such example is a dispensing pharmacy within the cancer program enabling patients to obtain their oral oncolytics where they receive their cancer care. This model offers patient convenience, enhances care coordination and communication, allows for closer monitoring of patients on oral agents, and facilitates more cost-effective care. In 2010, St. Luke’s Cancer Institute in Idaho initiated a medically integrated pharmacy model to manage patients on oral oncolytics, starting with two oral agents. Today, the cancer institute’s oral oncolytic medically integrated pharmacy is staffed by several pharmacists and pharmacy technicians who manage the care of more than 500 patients. A study conducted over a six-month period, showed that St. Luke’s Cancer Institute had an annual estimated net cost avoidance of \$1,730,416 through in-office dispensing as compared to an estimated net annual waste of \$119,794 for prescriptions filled through a mail order pharmacy.<sup>7,8</sup> Developing, piloting, and implementing an oral oncolytic collaborative practice agreement at St. Luke’s Cancer Institute’s medically integrated pharmacy resulted in reduced treatment delays and improved pharmacist and provider workflows.<sup>8,9</sup> Details on the St. Luke’s experience are available at [acc-cancer.org/Pharmacist-Collaborative-Practice](https://acc-cancer.org/Pharmacist-Collaborative-Practice).

## BILLING & REIMBURSEMENT

Since pharmacists do not currently have provider status, CPT codes higher than Level 1 are not routinely allowed by most payers. However, depending on the state scope of practice or the specific payer, pharmacists may bill for certain evaluation



and management (E&M), education, and training codes, for example.<sup>10</sup>

### **VALUE, QUALITY, AND SAFETY**

Hiring oncology pharmacists brings value to cancer programs, patients, and oncology physicians across multiple domains—institutional, cancer program-specific, education (for patients and staff), and outreach. In 2020, HOPA and the Academy of Managed Care Pharmacy published a white paper highlighting takeaways from a joint forum on value in cancer care that emphasized how—in the value-based environment—oncology pharmacist involvement in optimizing acute cancer care adds value to “patient-focused and clinician-focused care delivery.”<sup>11</sup>

Oncology pharmacists have many potential roles in the implementation of value-based care models. From serving on an organization’s Pharmacy & Therapeutics (P&T) Committee to managing cancer medication inventory, from patient education at the chairside to direct patient care through a collaborative practice agreement model, from establishing and administering an in-house specialty pharmacy to in-depth medication expertise, oncology pharmacists have a skill set that is well suited to the fast-changing oncology landscape. The capacity to understand both the clinical and economic implications of cancer therapies is critically important in the value-based reimbursement environment. Oncology pharmacists have the training and expertise to help cancer programs evolve strategically toward the IHI Triple Aim goals—improve the patient experience and reduce costs while maintaining quality.

### **CASE STUDY ONE ONCOLOGY PHARMACIST AS NAVIGATOR**

2018 ACCC Innovator Award recipient Legacy Cancer Institute integrated the role of oncology pharmacy navigator as an innovative approach to medication and side effect management,

to assist patients in accessing medications, to address patient financial concerns, and to standardize medication reconciliation, while achieving an annual cost savings, collecting quality metrics, and receiving recognition from an accrediting organization.<sup>12</sup> In the first year of this new position, the oncology pharmacy navigator was directly responsible for more than \$237,000 of cost savings.<sup>12</sup> Most of those savings resulted from accessing patient support programs, grants, foundations, and free drug programs through pharmaceutical companies to help offset the high co-pays often incurred by their patients; additional savings were realized from formulary changes and the revenue generated by selling supplements in the hospital-based retail pharmacies. The oncology pharmacy navigator position continues to realize cost savings of more than \$200,000 annually.<sup>12</sup> Details on Legacy Cancer Institute’s experience are available at [acc-cancer.org/The-Oncology-Pharmacy-Navigator](https://acc-cancer.org/The-Oncology-Pharmacy-Navigator).

### **CASE STUDY TWO PHARMACY-LED PRE-CERTIFICATION & DENIALS MANAGEMENT**

2019 ACCC Innovator Award recipient Lineberger Cancer Institute at UNC Medical Center initiated a pharmacy-managed, closed-loop medical benefit pre-certification and denials management program that includes a continuous quality improvement component.<sup>13</sup> Leaders in oncology pharmacy worked collaboratively across various health system teams involved in the cancer drug pre-certification and denials process. With denials management transferred to a pharmacy-led denials team, the new workflow reduced institutional revenue loss and patient financial toxicity through development of an institutional pre-certification policy, a streamlined process, engagement of pharmacy operations, optimization of manufacturer-supported patient assistance programs, and development of proactive medical necessity policy review. Oncology

pharmacy stepped up to take the lead in this endeavor, through which the institution realized millions of dollars in cost savings and patients experienced increased attention to and mitigation of financial toxicity.<sup>13</sup> Details on Lineberger Cancer Institute's experience are available at [acc-cancer.org/Pharmacy-Managed-Pre-Certification-and-Denials-Program](https://acc-cancer.org/Pharmacy-Managed-Pre-Certification-and-Denials-Program).

### CASE STUDY THREE TRANSITIONING DRUG ADMINISTRATION FROM THE INPATIENT TO OUTPATIENT SETTING

2020 ACCC Innovator Award recipient University of Arizona Cancer Center, Banner University Medical Center, Tucson brought together a multidisciplinary team of physicians, pharmacy staff, finance specialists, social workers, nursing staff, and information technologists to identify chemotherapy regimens administered in the inpatient setting that could be safely administered in the outpatient setting, and then implemented a transition plan that included provider and patient education.<sup>14</sup> Benefits included reduced inpatient medical resources and chemotherapy costs, decreased inpatient bed stay, lower infection rates, improved quality of life, and decreased overall cost of care—conservatively estimated at almost \$6 million.<sup>14</sup> Details on the University of Arizona Cancer Center's experience are available at [acc-cancer.org/Transitioning-Select-Chemotherapeutics](https://acc-cancer.org/Transitioning-Select-Chemotherapeutics). ●

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A publication from the President's Theme of 2021-2022 ACCC President Krista Nelson, MSW, LCSW, OSW-C, FAOSW, "Real-World Lessons from COVID-19: Driving Oncology Care Forward." Learn more at [acc-cancer.org/learn/presidents-theme](https://acc-cancer.org/learn/presidents-theme).

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