



ANDREW LIGHTMAN

Adding, NOT Subtracting

Focusing on specialty products
and patient care expands
business at a historic practice

By Michael Kim, PharmD

Grubb's Care Pharmacy on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., has been an intimate part of the community since its founding just after the Civil War. I was fortunate to have been exposed to Grubb's 130 years later in pharmacy school, and it changed my career path. During my externship in 1997, I filled prescriptions, compounded medications for pets, solved real-life medication problems, and talked to patients, doctors, and nurses. Working at a neighborhood pharmacy was a great experience and more rewarding than I had expected. I had worked for a grocery store chain while in pharmacy school, but after Grubb's I knew I wanted a career at a neighborhood pharmacy because the quality of care pharmacists are allowed to provide patients can be so much better than at pharmacies owned by large corporations. I also knew from the externship that I would be better able to apply what I had learned in school at a neighborhood pharmacy.

After graduating from Howard University in 1998, I began working as a pharmacist for Grubb's. In 2003, I became a junior partner. Three years later, I became the sole owner when co-owners Ed Dillon and Jeanette Partilla retired. The junior partnership was a good experience. The important thing in any junior partnership is communication between the seller and the buyer. The terms of the partnership have to be realistic and work for both sides. There is definitely no one way to structure a partnership. Every situation is going to be unique, which means that each partnership will be set up differently depending on the circumstances of all parties involved.

Over the past few years, the pharmacy has grown significantly. Much of this can be attributed to our increased focus on specialty products and customer care. Good for the community and good for business, specialty products are a perfect match for our diverse population, and local physicians want to know where they can find specialty medications in stock and ready to dispense. They have come to rely on our willingness to counsel and our focus on confidentiality. We are often

seen as a last-resort pharmacy in D.C. for unusual or hard-to-find medications. It is especially fulfilling for us because once patients enter our pharmacy, they usually become customers for life.

Unconventional Practice

I think much of our success can be attributed to some unconventional business practices. We're located in a cramped historic building a couple of blocks from the Capitol and the Supreme Court, and there is not much room for front-end merchandise. There's even less room for waiting customers. While other pharmacies are cutting pharmacist and technician hours during times of poor performance to strengthen the bottom line, we hire additional professional staff to maintain counseling availability, shorten wait times, and improve overall quality for customers—many of whom are members of Congress and their staffs. Our community anticipates a high level of service and we continually strive to exceed their expectations.

As the health of the world changes, so must pharmacies to keep up with the treatment of new and evolving disease states. Since our founding, we have been adapting to the ever-changing pharmacy environment. Of our niches, which include compounding and durable medical equipment, HIV/AIDS care has emerged as a core specialty. Our focus on HIV started with the previous owner, Ed Dillon, who saw the writing on the wall. He knew that HIV was a special disease state and took steps to be proactive in making sure that Grubb's was prepared to deal with the disease. As a result of the efforts put forth by Ed and continued by me, Grubb's is the leading provider of HIV drugs in Washington, D.C. The city has the highest rate of HIV/AIDS in the country, so we always need to be prepared to deal with this unique disease state.

In addition to providing care to our HIV/AIDS patients, we also make community outreach a priority. Last year, we collaborated with a drug company to provide monthly support groups for patients living with HIV/AIDS. They have also started working with a coalition to provide HIV screenings to the public in front of the pharmacy.

With hard work and dedication, you can make a suc-



successful practice more profitable. I've listed a few tips that can help your specialty area grow and prosper.

Make It Personal

Personal interest in a particular disease state or medical problem is always a great place to start. Typically, you will work harder, be more motivated to learn, and provide better care if it is something that you are interested in or something that affects a close friend or family member. Having that personal connection with the area is something that your patients will notice, and they will keep coming back to your pharmacy because they know that you care.

Be a Life-Long Learner

The medical field is constantly changing with new developments in the therapy of certain disease states; it's important for you to keep up to date. You should also learn from the personal experiences of your patients. Being well-educated in your specialty area will allow you to convey to both patients and practitioners that you are knowledgeable in that area and committed to patient care.

Commit to Patient Counseling

Being committed to counseling is very important in this realm of pharmacy because the disease states and medications can be complex and overwhelming for patients. Taking the time to sit down with patients to discuss their medications and how they relate to their disease state is a great way to build relationships with your patients. Developing these relationships will increase their confidence in your ability as a health care provider and they will keep using your pharmacy.

Take a Risk With Inventory


Medications used to treat some of these specialty diseases are very expensive. Many pharmacies are not willing to

take the risk of keeping these medications in stock. As a result, when patients present a prescription for one of these medications, they either have to go to another pharmacy or make another trip back to the pharmacy because it has to be ordered. At Grubb's, we make it our daily mission to carry those expensive drugs for our specialty areas, so that our patients will not have to go out of their way for the medications they need. We acknowledge that there is a risk involved with stocking this extra inventory. However, the profit made from the sale of these medications is higher, and we have also found that it keeps our patients loyal. They know that they can count on us to have the medication they need, when they need it.

Be a Smart Buyer

Competitive buying from manufacturers or wholesalers is key when purchasing specialty products. This can be done by being a part of a buying group, purchasing in bulk directly from the manufacturer, and by taking advantages of wholesaler incentives. It is of utmost importance with the margins so small and the inventory cost so high that you buy your products at the lowest possible price in order to stay in business and compete.

Marketing Equals Money

The key to success for most businesses is marketing. Take the time to let both physicians and patients know about the specialty services your pharmacy offers. You cannot expect them to use a service that they do not know about. Meet with local physicians and describe your services in detail; convey to them that you are well-educated in that specialty area. This can be done by just stopping by their office or by taking them out to lunch or dinner. You should also promote your services to your patients. Hold patient dinner programs or support group sessions where you can educate your patients on their disease states in a less threatening setting. Many times these sessions allow customers with the same diseases to share their experiences, which may eventually help out others and can ultimately educate you about what these patients are really going through. 

Michael Kim, PharmD, is the owner of Grubb's Care Pharmacy and Medical Equipment in Washington, D.C. He can be reached at drmikekim@gmail.com.