

City of Medicine – The Literal Interpretation Challenge

Printed in the Herald-Sun on December 6.

The “City of Medicine” phrase was coined by Durham as a way to describe the transition from a city built on the success of tobacco to a city on the cutting edge of biomedical research and healthcare. However, many leaders have noted that Durham is not always considered the “City of Health” as we continue to have so many under- and uninsured and rank low in many health indices.

In the 2007 Durham County Health Assessment Survey, a resident noted “The cost of medications is extremely high. If you don’t have the money to pay for it, you tend to sacrifice your own health to put food on the table.” Also, 19% of survey respondents said they had delayed filling or had not filled a prescription because they either couldn’t afford the prescriptions or procrastinated in filling it.

While Durham is very fortunate to have many unique programs to help residents gain access to the medications they need, regrettably, many people still do not know about these programs.

The easiest way to think about medication needs is to break them down into short-term versus more long-term, chronic medication needs. The following are tips to help keep medication costs down and resources available in Durham, some of which are unique to the City of Medicine:

Acute, Short-term Medication Needs:

- If you have prescription coverage, make sure that you talk with your doctor about prescribing something on your plan’s formulary (list of covered medications).
- If you don’t have drug coverage, ask your doctor about samples that she or he may have to share. These are often the newer, brand name medications.
- Ask your provider if they can possibly prescribe a generic medication that may save you a great deal.
- If you are still in the hospital about to be discharged, ask to speak with a discharge planner or a social worker about the need for medication assistance once you get home. Local hospitals will often provide short-term assistance if you demonstrate financial need.
- If you use an out-patient medical clinic that has a social worker, they can sometimes arrange for short-term assistance.
- The Department of Social Services and the Triangle United Way have created the Direct Medical Fund, which provides limited financial assistance for medications. Call 560-8600 for an appointment.
- Numerous human service agencies and faith communities offer short-term help.

Chronic, Long-term Medication Needs:

- Again, one of the most important things you can do is to let your providers, especially your doctor and pharmacist, know that you need help paying for your medications. They can often pick medications that are less costly and still effective.
- Many of the drug manufacturers have patient assistance programs, which provide medications at little or no cost to US citizens who have limited incomes. These company programs each use different eligibility criteria and forms. They can be accessed using several websites: for example, www.rxassist.org; www.needymeds.com; and www.pparx.org or call 1-888-477-2669.

- If you use a medical clinic that has a social worker, she or he can sometimes work with you and your doctor's office to access the drug companies' patient assistance programs.
- Many generic medications are available at reduced rates at retail pharmacies and some can be obtained for people with limited incomes at greatly reduced prices at www.rxoutreach.com or call 1-800-769-3880.
- The Department of Social Services administers Medicaid and Health Choice in Durham, and both programs cover medications. Eligibility is focused on pregnant women, families with children, foster children, elderly, and people with disabilities who meet the income and resource limits. See www.co.durham.nc.us/departments/dssv or call 560-8000.
- The Durham County Health Department has an in-house pharmacy that can be used by patients who receive services at the Health Department. The pharmacy benefits are focused on family planning and treating sexually transmitted diseases and tuberculosis. Call 560-7600.
- North Carolina has an AIDS Drug Assistance Program to help many people with HIV and AIDS medications. See www.epi.state.nc.us/epi/hiv/ or call (919) 715-3111.
- The Durham Center (the Local Management Entity with oversight for public mental health, substance abuse, and developmental disability services in Durham) has a program that helps some of their low-income clients with medications either via samples or through a contract with a local pharmacy that has a defined formulary. They also help their clients access the drug manufacturers' patient assistance programs. Call 560-7200.
- Lincoln Community Health Center (including their satellite clinics at Walltown and Lyon Park) serves roughly two-thirds of the uninsured in Durham. Their patients can access federally-subsidized medications on a sliding fee scale via their in-house pharmacy. They have a formulary and also help their patients obtain some medications through the drug companies' patient assistance programs. Call 956-4000.
- Senior PHARMAssist has recently expanded and now provides financial assistance with medications for Durham seniors 60 and older who have limited incomes. They have a geriatric formulary and either supplement Medicare drug benefits or help seniors who have no drug coverage. They also help participants with the drug manufacturers' patient assistance programs. See www.seniorpharmassist.org or call 688-4772.
- Medicare-approved drug benefits are privately administered drug plans that are available to any Medicare beneficiary. The Medicare drug benefit is very complex and is available in a stunning 52 private drug plans and 28 Medicare Advantage plans in Durham alone for 2008. Fortunately, many agencies in Durham have joined together to create the Durham Medicare Rx Network with Senior PHARMAssist as the lead agency. Every year the basic structure of the federal benefit is adjusted and the companies that offer the benefits change what medications they cover and at what cost. **Thus, it pays to compare plans every year.** Medicare beneficiaries with the most limited incomes and resources can get help paying for Medicare drug benefits from the federal government (called the low income subsidy or "extra help") or state government (called NCRx). Open enrollment for 2008 Medicare-approved drug plans ends December 31st.

Knowing where to turn for medication assistance is not necessarily simple. However, the City of Medicine has many programs and resources to help Durham residents obtain their necessary medications.

CLIP AND SAVE

Several agencies in Durham are ready to help Medicare beneficiaries:

- Lincoln Community Health Center and The Durham Center help their patients.
- Senior PHARMAssist helps Medicare beneficiaries – regardless of age or income – sort through the many drug coverage options. 688-4772.
- The NC Seniors’ Health Insurance Information Program (SHIIP) helps people select plans each year – 1-800-443-9354. The local SHIIP coordinators – Lynne Chamblee at the Council for Senior Citizens (688-8247) and Deborah McGiffin at the Durham County Cooperative Extension (560-0521) can also help with Medicare Advantage questions.
- The Social Security office, Senior PHARMAssist, and SHIIP will help Medicare beneficiaries apply for the federal prescription low income subsidies.
- Senior PHARMAssist and SHIIP will also help seniors 65 and older apply for NCRx – the state program to help seniors with Medicare-approved drug benefits.

The Partnership for a Healthy Durham is the Healthy Carolinians planning team for Durham and serves as the Health Committee for the City and County’s Results-Based Accountability initiative. The Access to Care Committee is responsible for this series of articles. For more information on the Partnership, see www.healthydurham.org or call 560-7833.