

VA a pioneer and leader in Rx systems

Innovations are a gift to the profession

There is no such thing as a typical day for Terrell Algood, BPharm. As the pharmacy benefits manager (PBM) for the Veterans Administration Integrated Service Network (VISN) 16, Algood oversees pharmacy benefits management at 10 VA sites, which are responsible for filling more than 12 million outpatient prescriptions a year. Comprising 10 centers located in the southern United States, VISN 16 serves 400,000 patients. Because of the large volume, about 80% of all prescriptions are filled through two of the seven Consolidated Mail Outpatient Pharmacies operated by VA.

Beyond typewritten labels

Filling and dispensing medications are only part of VA's reach. What many people do not realize is how instrumental the VA system is in developing pharmacy programs that go on to become the gold standard for the profession. Algood, who has worked as a VA pharmacist for more than 30 years, knows firsthand how important VA's work has been to pharmacy.

When he first joined the VA system as a pharmacist in the G.V. (Sonny) Montgomery VA Medical Center in Jackson, Miss., labels were still being typed with a typewriter—a far cry from the cutting-edge technology developed and used by VA today. “When I started, pharmacy was a distributive service and pharmacists seldom got out of the basement. We were just a voice on the phone,” said Algood. In the 1980s, pharmacists could be found on the hospital floor providing input on medication therapy. “Now we're overseeing students from the University of Mississippi, providing clinical services in anticoagulation and lipid and diabetes management in clinics and interfacing with providers every day to help them make good medication decisions for safe, cost-efficient therapy,” he said.

Advances in technology have played

a big part in expanding the pharmacist's role, and the VA center in Jackson served as an early test site for pharmacy software in the 1980s. “The I.V. program, unit-dose program, ward stock, controlled substance, and outpatient prescription programs were all developed by the VA for the VA,” said Algood. “New



Terrell Algood

technology has led to great advances in medication distribution and administration and patient care.”

Barcoding and more

Algood explained that the biggest changes have been improvements in efficiency and patient safety. “With computerized provider order entry, pharmacists are no longer reading providers' handwriting. Bar-coded patient armbands ensure that the right dose is going to the right patient at the right time,” he said. “These advances have helped us close the loop on patient care so there's less room for error.”

VA's Computerized Patient Record System offers other advantages. “We can go into the records and look at the entire medical record, including medication profiles and lab values from anywhere in the medical center—even remotely,” said Algood. “While we maintain tight information security, health care

providers have remote access so that decisions on patient care can be made any time, anywhere.”

An electronic system also allows VA to create a data warehouse. Algood is responsible for working with data warehouse managers in developing research projects generated from this huge databank. “The data has many applications. For example, we can capture lab values and associate drug use with lab values,” he said. The databank also allowed the VA system to fill tens of thousands of prescriptions for displaced victims of Katrina all across the nation. “Part of our responsibility is disaster planning,” Algood explained. “When Katrina hit, our database was up and running.”

Algood serves as VISN 16's liaison to the National Formulary Committee. “Individual centers no longer have to create their own formularies. The VA's national PBM also creates monographs on new drugs so that individual centers don't need to do that on their own. We have a group of clinical pharmacists who, working in concert with the VA's Medical Advisory Panel and VISN leaders, do just this,” he stated.

Benefits for all

VA's technology and work on monographs are available to everyone in the profession. “There's a big benefit to what the VA does, not just to the VA but to the profession in general,” Algood said. “Individual drug monographs, class reviews, and treatment guidelines are all available on the VA's Web site www.pbm.va.gov. Much of the software developed by the VA is public domain software. Our work benefits the entire profession.”

One of the next challenges will be completely rewriting VA's pharmacy software package, a project that is expected to take 2 years. Algood believes the VA pharmacy is up to the job. “Nothing gets less complex,” he said. “Every day brings new challenges. In our network, we serve almost 400,000 people through our pharmacy services. We have to anticipate not what we need now or will need tomorrow, but what we may need to do this job in 5 years and beyond.”

—Barbara Sax
Contributing writer