

IT IS GREAT TO SEE ADVANCEMENT IN MEDICAL SCIENCES OFFERING INNOVATIVE DRUG TREATMENT CHOICES FOR DISEASES WHERE THERE WERE NO OPTIONS IN THE PAST OR NEW DRUG TREATMENTS THAT NOW ARE CURATIVE; HOWEVER, FROM A DRUG PLAN MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE, HOW DO WE MANAGE THE COSTS TO ENSURE SUSTAINABILITY?



ATUL GOELA

Director, Pharmaceutical Benefits, Sun Life Financial



Photography: Rob Barnes

What previous career experiences do you find most valuable in your current role?

I feel fortunate to have had diversity of experience in my previous roles. Having worked as a pharmacist in the retail environment, I have experience directly interacting with patients so I have learned about their needs, the types of questions that they have for the pharmacist and their drug and health concerns. When I moved into regional operations, I learned how stores operate, and how pharmacies and networks of pharmacies operate.

Now, working for a carrier, I have thorough grounding in claims adjudication and the pressures that carriers and sponsors face.

I guess you could say I've seen every step along a prescription's path – from the time it enters the pharmacy to the time it's adjudicated, to the time the carrier pays the claim, to the plan sponsor making a decision on the plan design that will impact how the prescription is paid. In my current role, it's great to have an overarching perspective and an understanding of each stakeholder's challenges and opportunities.

What trends are you seeing in drug plans and drug plan management?

The biggest trend is escalation in drug costs due to specialty drugs, which are translating into escalating costs of drug plans. For three to five years, we saw flat or decreasing drug costs, but over the last two years (or even 18 months), we've seen a sharp rise. The magnitude of these costs is unprecedented – it's been an eye opener to see annual treatment costs per patient in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, in some cases, and how this can impact plan sustainability. From a member

THE PERFORMERS

× CANADA'S INFLUENTIAL THOUGHT LEADERS ×

ATUL GOELA

Director, Pharmaceutical Benefits, Sun Life Financial

perspective, it's great to see drugs that can offer a high percentage of cure rates; however, from a drug plan management perspective, how do we sustainably manage the costs? I can't tell you how many plan sponsors I've talked to about solutions – it's a real upward trend.

What's behind the rise in costs?

The biggest environmental factor is that the pharmaceutical industry has a tremendous pipeline of innovative products. Look at advancements in technology in areas outside of drugs: for example, in the computing power of a cell phone today versus three years ago versus 10 years ago. This is analogous to what's happening in drug development today. Great, innovative products are coming to market, but they cost a significant amount. Combine that with an aging population and greater prevalence of disease in general, and chronic disease in particular, and plan sponsors are understandably concerned about how to keep costs in check while still meeting plan members' health needs.

How are plan sponsors reacting?

Plan sponsors are paying more attention to drug benefits, whether or not they've experienced a sharp increase in their costs or have had first-hand experience of a high-cost drug claim in their plan. They're asking, "What do these new drugs mean for my plan?", "Have I seen a claim for any of them?" [and] "Can I expect to see claims for them?" Part of

that is because a lot more traditional and social media attention is being paid to drug development. We talk about "Dr. Google," as an example. People have more opportunities to research, form opinions and express them.

What are some of the best strategies plan sponsors can use to control drug plan costs?

It's sometimes surprising that mandatory generic substitution, prior authorization and preferred pharmacy networks aren't on all drug plans. They are simple, yet advanced, solutions that are easy to implement, and effective ways to help manage escalating costs. As we move into the future, we also need to think about health management: how are we preventing some of these diseases from occurring or preventing their progression in the population?

What's your role in the organization and how does it help plan sponsors?

My role is to help plan sponsors get the most out of their drug plans and devise strategies that are aligned with their business philosophies. It's something I'm passionate about, so I use my experience to provide subject matter expertise and insights, both within Sun Life [and] to plan sponsors, about the drug landscape, the drivers of drug costs in their drug plan and effective ways to manage their plan.

Helping to navigate change that comes with adopting new solutions or refining strategies is something that I

find rewarding, especially when I see tangible, positive differences in a plan sponsor's experience.

How has your leadership style evolved throughout your career?

It's important to understand the drivers at play when making a decision. I read a quote once: "It's not about all that you know. It's about the questions that you ask." So, my leadership style is to ask a lot of questions to grasp the issues at hand and then find a 'win-win' solution. How has that style evolved throughout my career? I think I've just gotten better at asking the right questions, based on the experiences that I've had, and recognizing that, depending on the stakeholder, the impacts of the decision will be different.

What's your best advice to aspiring leaders in the benefits industry?

Be open to learning. It's such a dynamic industry, with so many interrelated players, that I find I'm always learning something. It's important to come to work with a mentality of "No, I don't know everything, and every day is going to bring something new." That also makes it challenging and really exciting!

