

# Daily News

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Since

## LOCAL SPECIALTY



# Taking a high-tech, high-touch approach to specialty community care

by Chris Linville

At Blount Discount Pharmacy, Inc. in Tennessee, the business was wrestling with a sort of Catch-22 that many other independents face. "Filling prescriptions is our bread and butter. That's our connection to the community," co-owner Phil LaFoy, DPh, says. Yet at the same time, many pharmacies are losing money on prescriptions. So in a sense, they can't afford to do it, but at the same time they can't afford to not do it. "If we're not filling prescriptions, we're toast. That said, if the only thing you are doing is filling prescriptions, you're toast. So you have to open some new doors."

Blount Discount Pharmacy has three retail locations in Blount County (two in Maryville, and one in Alcoa). Blount County is near Knoxville in the eastern part of the state. LaFoy (who co-owns the business with fellow Samford University pharmacy graduate Aaron Clark, DPh) says that in mid-2011 the pharmacy was doing compliance packaging in one of its retail locations and looking to possibly expand it into a stand-alone long-term care operation. Around that time, he also became more aware of specialty pharmacy from respected colleagues he serves with on Cardinal Health's advisory board (Nick Karalis, John Balch, and Angelo Defazio). LaFoy says that consultant Joe Giorno helped Karalis set up the marketing team for Karalis' specialty pharmacy, Elwyn Specialty Care in Media, Pa.

"In talking to those guys who were in specialty already, we started educating ourselves on what specialty pharmacy was and what it entailed," says LaFoy, winner of the 2013

NCPA Prescription Drug Safety Award. "Joe Giorno came to us as a consultant and helped walk us through setting it up. We just feel strongly that specialty pharmacy services should be available in communities, and should be provided by community pharmacies." So in June 2012, Blount Specialty Pharmacy opened as a stand-alone business, with an LTC section also sharing the facility.

## **BUILDING THE BUSINESS**

The business originally began as Greenbelt Village Discount Pharmacy in July 1982. Clark arrived in May of 1996, followed by LaFoy that November. The company became Blount Discount County Pharmacy in 1989, and in the following years began opening additional retail locations along with the LTC and specialty facilities. The three retail stores operate as Blount Discount Pharmacy. The combined entity [Blount Discount Pharmacy and Blount Specialty Pharmacy] do business as Blount Discount Pharmacy, Inc.

In moving toward providing specialty pharmacy services, LaFoy says that Karalis told him, "To do it right, you have to pull it out of your standard retail, because you can't afford to let anything fall through the cracks because of the compliance piece. So we took the mindset that the best patient care comes in community pharmacy. Because we have a high-tech, high-touch approach to specialty care, I can offer everything that the mail order specialty pharmacy offers, but I can touch the patient, and they can't. The sickest people here need the best care that we can offer. They don't need somebody who is 1,000 miles away."

Blount Specialty Pharmacy has more of a regional reach, serving not only Blount County, but patients throughout

eastern Tennessee. It also has licenses to deliver medications to patients in nearby southwest Virginia and western North Carolina.

The pharmacy provides specialty pharmacy services for patients with hepatitis C, Crohn's disease, HIV/AIDS, multiple sclerosis, cancer, rheumatoid arthritis, psoriasis, and anemia. In December 2014, Blount Specialty Pharmacy dispensed 389 specialty prescriptions.

LaFoy says the majority of Blount's specialty prescriptions are by referral. The pharmacy has referral forms that are disease state specific fillable PDFs, and physicians or nurses can fill them out online, sign them, and fax them in.

"That starts the process," he says. "The vast majority of these medications are delivered [by their drivers]. We do some one-on-one consultations, some at their home or at the pharmacy. We also have a nurse that goes into some homes and does injection training."

LaFoy says that Blount's approach and menu of offerings seems appealing to health care providers.

"Between working with doctors and insurance agents, if they find out that we are in their network, they can promote us as being a component of the packages they present, because that way they can get their specialty medications locally and not from Arizona or somewhere else," he says. "That just helps spread the word, and it goes back to the community thing. You get people in the community who know the service that you are providing, and the word spreads. And then through the doctors' offices, that word spreads. Our marketing rep keeps us out there in front of those physicians' offices. It's very competitive. I've got [specialty pharmacies] from all over the country competing for this business. So we have to be out there making sure people know who we are, and what we're about."

"Our patients know our delivery people; they know them by name. Sometimes with an older person who is really sick,



*It's a typical busy day for the Blount Specialty Pharmacy staff as it works to serve its patient base. Pictured are (clockwise from top left): Beth Byerley, CPbT; Belinda Ellis, PharmD; Jennifer Wilson, PharmD; Patricia Cable, CPbT; and Cathy Bush, CPbT.*

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the delivery people are some of the only contacts they have with the outside world, so they look forward to the deliveries to their home."

Having to work a bit harder to get the business can be challenging, but is also worthwhile, LaFoy says.

"For a payer to buy into what we are doing, we have to convince them that we are every bit as good – if not better than – the big box stores, because for some crazy reason nobody wants to believe that we can perform and produce like they do," he says. "After talking with Nick [Karalis] and learning about that part of the business, we thought that was a good direction for us to go because of the position we're in with the community. It's been pretty cool how it's developed. And the doctors have embraced what we are doing. An oncologist in Knoxville asked, 'You're local? And you are doing this?' It blew his mind."

Blount Specialty Pharmacy is happy to lend a hand to providers in driving through the weeds of administrative detail involved with patient care. The pharmacy now uses CoverMyMeds®, an online prior authorization system, but even before that it was helping with that process.

"We were jumping through the hoops, helping them with the prior authorizations, helping them get through all of the hurdles, the copay cards, patient assistance programs, and the different non-profit organizations that help with these various disease states," he says. "Because a \$1,000 copay is not realistic for a lot of people, somebody has to help them pay for it. Our patient care coordinator is very busy and very familiar with all aspects of helping get assistance for these folks to get their medicine."

## **COMPLIANCE**

Compliance is especially important for Blount Specialty Pharmacy. LaFoy says the pharmacy uses software from Therigy STM's specialty clinical platform to help manage its program.

"It's an amazing tool," he says. "It has disease state protocols. So our intake, from Step 1, for a new patient, through treatment, through refills – everything is documented. Physicians can relate to this because it's like the EMR [elec-

tronic medical record] system they work on every day. We use it as a compliance tool, as it tells us every day who we need to contact, which physician should be contacted, and what we need to talk about. It's patient specific, disease specific, and drug specific."

One of the reasons Blount made a big technology investment was to prepare for URAC accreditation. URAC is an independent, nonprofit organization promoting health care quality through its accreditation, education, and measurement programs. LaFoy says health care providers, especially the ones that are also accredited, put a lot of stock in being accredited. The pharmacy received its URAC accreditation on July 1, 2013.

"It's probably the hardest thing I've ever done in my whole life," he says of the accreditation process. "But it's made our entire company better. Because our specialty operation was small, when we started the process, with the high level of quality requirements needed, we were able to develop a corporate quality program that not only affected our specialty operation, but our retail operation as well. So we have quality officers at each store, quality committee meetings, and quality improvement programs. We're doing a lot of the things that are discussed in the community pharmacy accreditation standards. That's the foundation for everything that we do. It makes me so proud at our meetings to see our people so engaged. They've grasped it and they see the value in it. It's made us all better."

LaFoy tries to deflect any credit for the pharmacy's success, pointing to the efforts of his staff, including his compliance packaging team (Belinda Ellis, PharmD; Cathy Bush, CPhT; Patricia Cable, CPhT; and Donna Silcox, CPhT), specialty pharmacy services professionals (Jennifer Wilson, PharmD; John Peterson, DPh; and patient care coordinator Beth Byerley, CPhT), and marketing representative MaryAnn Riddle.

"They do a tremendous amount of good work, so they deserve to be recognized," LaFoy says.

Looking ahead, LaFoy says that Blount Specialty Pharmacy doesn't have any specific plans other than doing its best to provide service to its community.

"The growth has come slowly but steadily, which is what we wanted," he says. "Our goal is to fill every specialty prescription in Blount County. We're just very thankful to have what we have, and to be in the position that we're in right now." ■

**Chris Linville is managing editor of *America's Pharmacist*.**