

## Rx help for needy patients

### *Charitable pharmacy dispenses free meds*

We hear about patients in financial straits who must choose between paying their heating bill and paying for needed medications. St. Vincent de Paul (SVDP) Charitable Pharmacy in Cincinnati is doing something to alleviate this problem.

#### Bridge to patient care

Since September 2006, the SVDP Charitable Pharmacy has offered needy patients access to free medications from its own resources and help accessing patient assistance programs and Medicare Part D for long-term solutions. The SVDP pharmacy operates 3 days per week, providing free, professional pharmacy care to people who may have had a financial crisis but, for any number of reasons, are not eligible for Medicaid or have Medicaid claims pending. As of December, the pharmacy has dispensed close to 17,000 prescriptions this year, with the 2008 total expected to reach 19,000.

The need for this service is growing constantly, according to Pharmacy Manager Mike Espel, BPharm. He told *Today* that an average of 15 new clients apply for assistance every day the pharmacy is open, but his staff can only accommodate 10 new applicants per day. Clients include the homeless, people who have lost their jobs, and the working poor who cannot afford copays or don't have prescription insurance coverage. Some may only need temporary assistance as they try to qualify for other coverage or assistance programs, while some need more long-term help. The SVDP program serves four counties around and including Cincinnati.

#### Beyond medical support

Clients go through a screening process to determine their eligibility for the program. They can be qualified for up to 6

months of assistance, which not only includes free medications but also counseling and education from a pharmacist to ensure that patients take their medications properly and are aware of possible adverse effects and interactions. They meet with a patient advocate/social worker who assesses their needs for a medical home, mental health care, shelter, or other social services. The charitable



**Mike Espel**, BPharm, with a patient at the St. Vincent de Paul Charitable Pharmacy

pharmacy, housed in the SVDP building, is part of a comprehensive program of services that include a job readiness program, a food pantry where clients can choose their own groceries, and help securing essentials such as transportation and ID cards. SVDP thrift stores throughout the city help to provide clothing and furniture to the poor and financial support for social service programs.

#### Leadership brainchild

The idea for the SVDP pharmacy came out of a local Leadership Cincinnati class meeting of local leaders. A need was identified for such a resource, funders were located, and 4 years later, SVDP Charitable Pharmacy opened, initially for 2 days each week. Before it could become a reality, however, a state law had to be passed allowing the pharmacy to dispense sample drugs. SVDP was instrumental in pushing this legislation through in Ohio. St. Vincent de Paul pharmacies also operate in Kentucky, Florida, and Louisiana.

In addition to physician samples, the pharmacy relies on donations from wholesalers and manufacturers; Espel noted that AstraZeneca had been particularly generous in maintaining its bulk replenishment commitment. The pharmacy is also a drug repository for sev-

eral local long-term care facilities. Espel purchases some generics to round out the pharmacy's formulary but explained that it is hard to keep some expensive drugs, such as those for glaucoma, in stock. "The primary problem is getting the scripts out; right now we have the medicine," Espel explained.

#### Direct impact

Espe's involvement with the SVDP Charitable Pharmacy began while he was working as Pharmacy Director for the Cincinnati Health Department; he served on an SVDP advisory committee that was planning the project. After retirement from a 32-year career with the city, he became a consultant to the pharmacy and later its manager. Working 35 hours per week, Espel supervises two part-time volunteer pharmacists, a full-time patient advocate, and two pharmacy rotation students per month from the University of Cincinnati. He also gets volunteer help from prepharmacy students for about 36 hours per week but said he is still short staffed. A full-time pharmacy technician is needed to orient and help coordinate the efforts of the volunteers, Espel told *Today*. "Without all the volunteer help, we really couldn't do it," he said.

Espe described the impact that the SVDP Charitable Pharmacy's services had on a typical patient—a man who had received a heart transplant in Chicago and needed cyclosporin and mycophenolate mofetil. The patient had been receiving medications through patient assistance programs but had somehow become disconnected and ended up at SVDP. Espel's staff was able to obtain the necessary drugs for him from long-term care drug repository supplies to help him for several months until he was reconnected with an assistance program. The patient was so appreciative that he frequently returns, asking if he can help out, and even tried to repay the pharmacy for the cost of some of his medications.

—Carli Richard

**Editor's note:** For more information or to make a donation, contact SVDP Charitable Pharmacy at 1125 Bank Street, Cincinnati, OH 45214; 513-562-8841, ext. #225, or visit [www.SVDPcincinnati.org](http://www.SVDPcincinnati.org).



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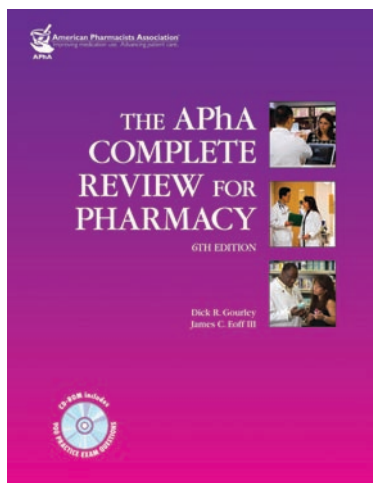
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