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Care Management Case Study

Aetna's Compassionate Care Program for Advanced Illness



Aetna is one of the nation's leading diversified health care benefits companies, serving an estimated 44 million people with information and resources to help them make better decisions about their health care. Aetna offers a broad range of traditional, voluntary and consumer-directed health insurance products and related services, including medical, pharmacy, dental, behavioral health, and group life and disability plans. Their goal is to build a simpler, more integrated health care system that makes the right care at the right time possible, with less duplication and hassle.

Background

Aetna's long-standing Compassionate Care Program is designed to improve the quality of patient care for individuals with life-threatening illnesses by helping patients get access to palliative care and hospice benefits. Key to the success of this program is Aetna's highly trained case managers who work with patients and their families to make life better for patients with advanced illness.

Program Description

Through this initiative, Aetna offers complex case management to members with serious illness who are enrolled in the Aetna Compassionate Care Program (ACCP). The ACCP focuses on helping people understand pain management and other palliative care options, and enables them to make more informed decisions about how to spend their final days, at no additional cost to members.

The foundation of the ACCP, which also provides a direct benefit to patients, is the liberalization, or relaxation of restrictions, of the hospice benefit. In 2004, Aetna liberalized its hospice benefit with a group of commercial plan sponsors, finding that liberalizing the hospice benefit, along with the use of case management did not increase costs. As a result, this construct is now standard for Aetna's commercial business, except for Medicare Advantage due to CMS' coverage and payment rules for hospice care.

Today, the ACCP removes barriers to accessing hospice care by eliminating the requirement that commercially-insured members stop curative treatment to be eligible for hospice benefits. Aetna offers concurrent hospice and disease-directed treatment in commercial plans for members with a prognosis of up to 12 months, in contrast to the standard Medicare hospice benefit requirements of a prognosis of six months.

Care Management Strategies

Members are identified in several ways: (1) a predictive model developed by Aetna; (2) a concurrent review and precertification process; (3) member self-referrals from program information featured in member newsletters; and (4) physician referrals. Case managers complete a comprehensive assessment of the patient's needs by telephone, and consult with the patient, physician, and patient's family.

The success of the ACCP is due to the efforts of the dedicated and experienced case managers who are able to



develop trusting and meaningful relationships with Aetna members and their families at a time when they are most vulnerable and in need of assistance. Case managers serve as the liaison between the medical practices and Aetna's care management resources. Nurse case managers are trained to manage patients with multiple chronic conditions, depression, dementia, advanced illness, or palliative care needs. This training includes dealing with the unique and often difficult circumstances associated with advanced illness. Case managers provide education and support, give assistance with pain medications and psychosocial needs, and help ensure that advance directives are in place and followed. In addition, they can also coordinate home and community-based care services, help members monitor their health conditions, identify barriers to care, and address issues arising in care transitions.

Initially, Aetna relied on a telephonic system for care management, but it is gradually transitioning to a model where the case managers are embedded in the physicians' practices. This collaborative care model has proven to be more effective than remote case management alone, as clinicians and case managers work together to better identify and serve patients in need. Also, being embedded in the practices provide the case managers the ability to interact directly with the patients and physicians' staff.

Findings

In Aetna's experience, a key ingredient to success is selecting, training, and mentoring good case managers. Case managers often develop a close relationship with members, and the depth of this connection is valued by members and their families. Additionally, these nurses find this important work highly rewarding.

For members enrolled in the ACCP, there is:

- Tripling of the hospice election rate;
- More than doubling of the average hospice length-of-stay;
- 82% reduction in acute inpatient days;
- 86% reduction in intensive care unit days;
- 77% reduction in emergency department visits; and
- A high level of satisfaction among members and families.