

3 Steps to Building a Clinical Practice in Your Retail Pharmacy



Introduction

The odds are stacked against community pharmacies these days. Increased competition from online and mail order pharmacies has made patient retention more important than ever for independents. Plus, falling reimbursement rates and rising DIR fees are making it even harder to turn a profit as a business.

The healthcare landscape is evolving. With advancements in legislation, a growing shortage of primary care physicians, and the changes resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, community pharmacists are providing more clinical care for their patients than ever before. It's a win-win for both pharmacists and patients; pharmacists build a revenue stream apart from their medication dispensing, and patients have a trusted option for clinical care that's often more accessible and convenient than a trip to their doctor's office.

But what if your pharmacy isn't offering clinical care yet? Or what if you're at the very beginning of your journey, and you're feeling overwhelmed?

Working with clinical care expert Jason Ausili, Pharm.D., the team at EnlivenHealth® put together this guide to help community pharmacists begin the process of transforming their pharmacies by developing and implementing a clinical practice. This guide distills the establishment of a clinical practice down to 3 important steps. While there may be other aspects to consider, these 3 steps will point you in the right direction and help you as you begin your pharmacy transformation journey.

When asked if he had any advice for pharmacists starting their clinical services program (or still contemplating starting one at all), Jason didn't hesitate. "Start small and mitigate your risk," he said. "Then build from there into the practice your community needs."

So, let's get started.

Pharmacy Transformation Journey Roadmap



Step 1:

Develop Your Scope of Practice

In the face of competition from online drugstores and mail-order pharmacy programs, patient retention is paramount for community pharmacies. And, unfortunately, keeping patients is only getting harder.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, thousands of pharmacies across the country were offering clinical services to their patients. As the pandemic set in, pharmacists and their staff were granted privileges that allowed them to close the health equity gap by making testing, vaccinations, and treatment options more accessible, accelerating that pivot into clinical care. In addition to old standbys like immunizations, many pharmacies have begun to offer services like point-of-care testing, test-and-treat programs, oral contraceptives, smoking cessation programs, and diabetes prevention programs. Before you decide which services your pharmacy should provide, you need to ask one very important question.

“Start small and mitigate your risk. Then build from there into the practice your community needs.”

Jason Ausili, Pharm.D.
Head of Pharmacy Transformation, EnlivenHealth

The easiest way to find out what your community needs is... ask. And the best, most consistent way to ask is to conduct a survey. Here's what to do:

1. Set up a survey using an online survey tool. Some of the best free options are Google Forms, SurveyMonkey, or TypeForm.
2. Send a link to your patients via text message (if your patients have consented to receiving text messages from your pharmacy) or add a QR code linked to the survey to a bag insert. (QR codes can be scanned from the flyer using the patient's phone, whereas a link would have to be manually typed out; when it comes to any sort of consumer behavior, convenience always wins.) There are several online QR code generators to choose from, and most of them — like QR Code Generator or QRCode Monkey — allow you to create codes for free.
3. Use your chosen online survey tool to compile a report based on the results. There's your answer about what your patients actually want from your pharmacy.

Another method for determining which clinical services you should provide involves a little more detective work. Reviewing your prescription data can give you insight into the services that could potentially benefit your patients. For instance, if you have a significant number of patients on insulin, it might be good to offer diabetes self-management education and training programs.¹

Remember: If the need is there, the revenue will come. Don't be afraid to invest in a clinical care specialist if you believe your community's needs can justify the hire. Your pharmacy's clinical practice may be the only medical provider for miles.



Are There Limits to the Care You Can Provide?

Even with the increasing shortage of primary care physicians, state legislation limits the types of services a pharmacist can perform for their patients, and those limits vary by state. In addition to that, the types of services for which payers will reimburse pharmacists also vary. To ensure you're performing services that are both legal and eligible for reimbursement, you're going to have to do some homework.

For example, pharmacists can administer influenza vaccines in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. When it comes to COVID-19 vaccines, however, only 49 states allow pharmacists to immunize their patients, with Missouri and the District of Columbia being the exceptions. However, for both the influenza and COVID-19 vaccines, 31 states restrict vaccine administration based on age, and 14 of those states require a prescription from a physician before the pharmacist can administer the vaccine to certain age groups. (South Carolina requires prescriptions for ALL COVID-19 vaccines administered by pharmacists.) 2

When it comes to clinical services, there are very few across-the-board yes's or no's. What some states allow, others don't. What some payers will reimburse for, others will not. Your best bet is to check with your individual state pharmacy association to see what services you can legally perform in your state. As far as what services payers will reimburse you for providing, that one is a bit more complicated, and we'll cover it later in this e-book.

What Are Your Clinical Service Options?

Here are just a few of the clinical services that pharmacies can provide. As noted above, you'll have to check with your state pharmacy association to see which ones your state allows pharmacists to perform.

- Flu shots and other immunizations
- COVID-19 & Flu testing and treatment
- Point-of-care testing
- Smoking cessation
- Hormonal contraception
- Medication therapy management
- Medical nutrition therapy
- Diabetes self-management education and training

It's important to note that, once you establish your scope of practice, it's not exactly written in stone. Restaurants change their menus all the time; there's no reason you can't add services over time. Don't be afraid to start small and expand your clinical service as you grow. Always be innovating.

What Services Will Payers Cover?

While finding out what services you can legally provide to your patients is important, it's just as important to find out what services the payers in your state will reimburse you for.

Start by examining your most frequent payers — let's say the top five to make it easy. Reach out to their provider services department and find out what clinical services they will reimburse pharmacists for. You can generally find contact information for provider services on the health plan's website or on their helpline. (For example, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Tennessee keeps their provider information at <https://provider.bcbst.com>.) After reaching out to your top payers, make a list of the services each one reimburses for and see where the overlap is.

“The growth potential is endless.”

Jackie Nelson, RPh
Sterling Pharmacy



How Do You Build Relationships with Payers?

Building relationships with payers can be challenging for many pharmacists. “It’s just not something they’re accustomed to doing,” said Ausili. The average pharmacist doesn’t have many payer contacts or even know how to reach out to them.

The provider services department, as outlined above, is your most direct path to discussing services with payers — but it’s not the only one.

Pharmacists can also build relationships with payers through state and national pharmacy associations and through clinically integrated groups like the Community Pharmacy Enhanced Services Network (CPESN). In addition, conferences like the Pharmacy Quality Alliance’s (PQA) annual meeting are focused on garnering value-based care opportunities in which pharmacists can help solve plan problems.

Recuperating the Cost of Establishing Your Clinical Practice

In the long run, providing clinical care for your patients will drive revenue. But that doesn’t mean that there won’t be costs to recuperate. To get an idea of how long it will be before you see profits from your clinical endeavors, you need to perform a break-even analysis:

1. Estimate your monthly expenses for operating a clinical practice within your pharmacy. Make sure to include everything you can think of: supplies, additional personnel hours, marketing efforts, etc.
2. Research how much your pharmacy will be reimbursed for different clinical services. Considering the average appointment duration for each of these services and the frequency you expect to see, come up with an hourly average revenue for your clinical practice per patient.
3. Using the numbers from steps 1 and 2, determine how many patients you will need to see per month to break even. There’s your profit benchmark.

Also, keep in mind that there are programs out there that can help offset the cost of opening a clinical practice. Look at local pharmacy associations for guidance. Also, check to see if your pharmacy can leverage CDC grant money and other federal grants for clinical services. (In particular, check out grant DP18-1815 - Improving the Health of Americans Through Prevention and Management of Diabetes, Heart Disease, and Stroke. Its primary focus is on diabetes self-management education and diabetes prevention.)

Step 2: Plan Out Your Technology Strategy

Technology plays an enormous role in helping you establish, maintain, and scale a clinical practice. While most pharmacists have transitioned from a paper-based process to one supported by technology, there are still some who do things manually. Unfortunately, those are the ones who will have a tougher time operating a clinical practice in addition to their dispensing practice.

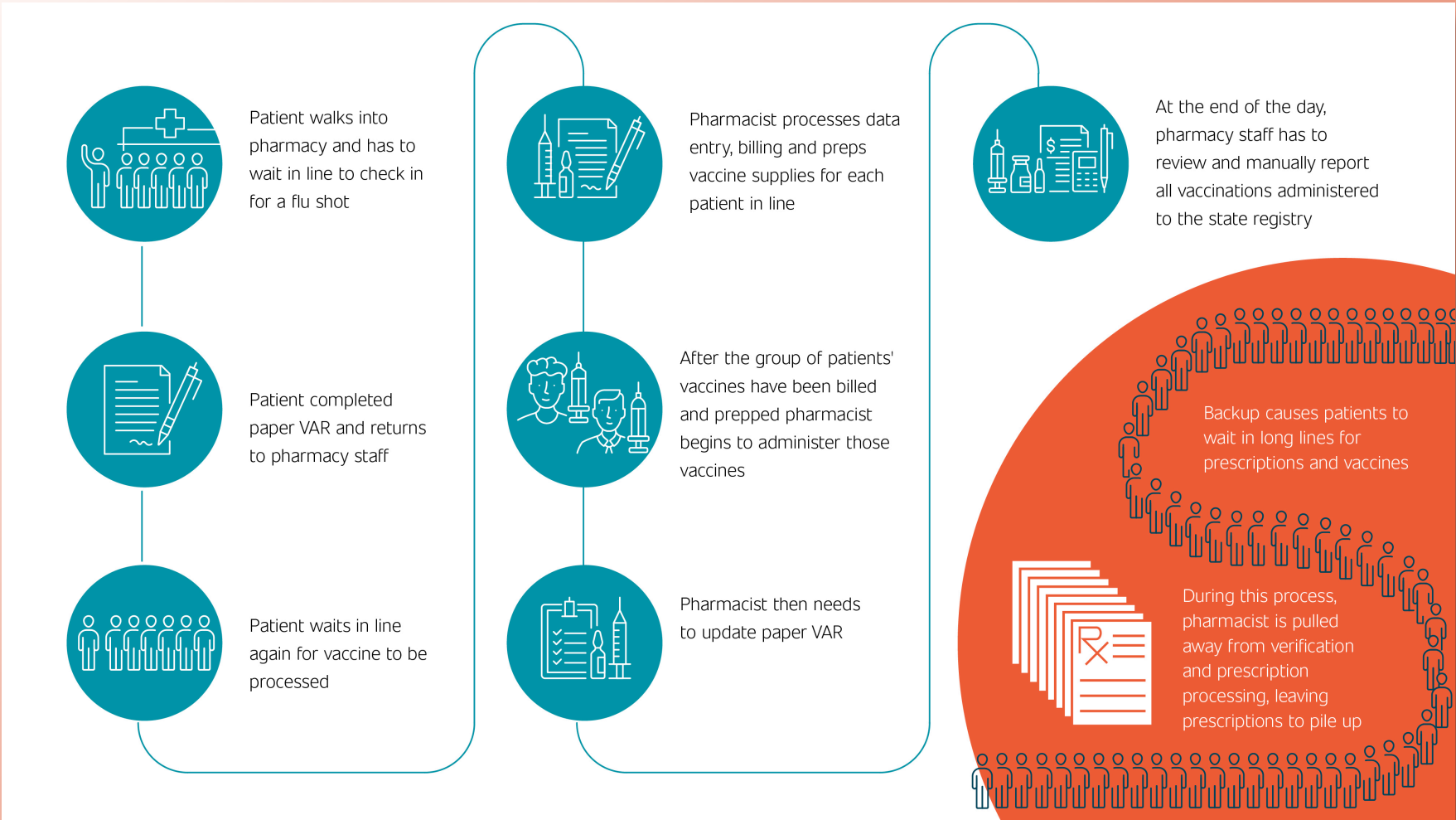
Manual Processes Don't Allow Room for Growth

If you're still working with notepads, sticky notes, and paper files, you're doing far more work than you need to be. The fact is, manual processes will limit just how much your clinical practice can grow. After all, you only have so many hours in the day; the more hours you spend filling out paperwork or chasing files, the fewer hours you have to spend with your patients and provide revenue-generating clinical services.

Simply put, manual, paper-based processes can't sustain a scalable operation. When you can't automate tasks or support your staff with technology, any growth your pharmacy experiences comes with a need for more time or more team members. Processes that automate the dispensing process, such as interactive voice response (IVR) and medication synchronization, are critical to freeing up staff time to be reinvested in clinical services.

Beyond growth, manual methods can be both inefficient and error-prone. For instance, trying to bill payers for providing clinical care can not only cost you time; it can also lead to mistakes in the billing process that can cost you revenue.

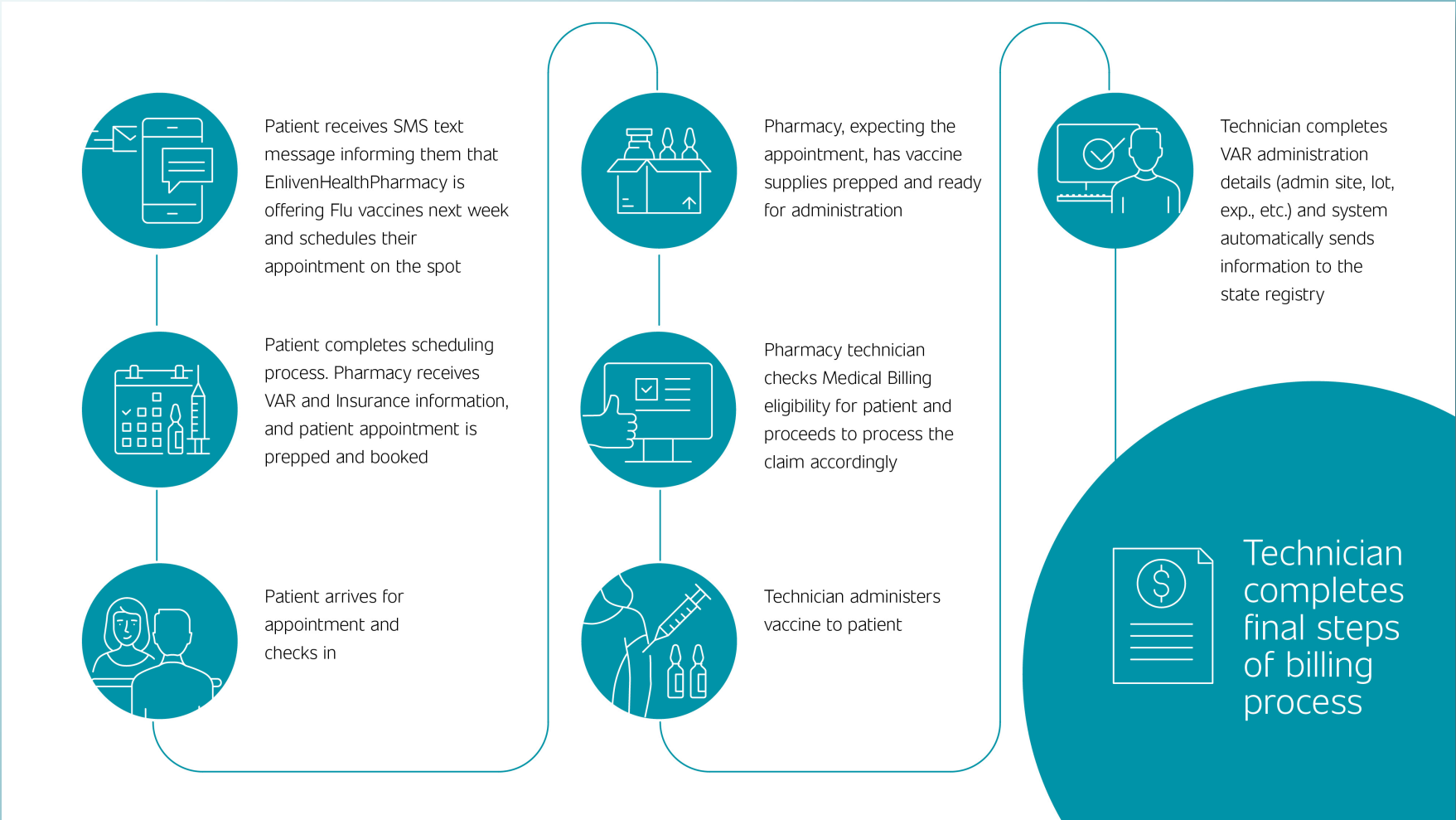
Here's a typical flu vaccination workflow for a community pharmacy when all the tasks are performed manually:



The 5 Clinical Tasks You Should Support with Technology

Technology allows you to not only establish a clinical practice, but also grow it. When you use technology to either support or completely automate clinical tasks, you create more hours in the day for you and your staff to provide care to your patients. And that leads to healthier, happier patients, as well as a stronger bottom line for your pharmacy.

Remember that flu vaccination workflow from the previous section? Here is what it looks like with multiple tasks automated through technology:



Isn't that better?

When establishing your clinical practice, there are five tasks that you should allow software to support from the very beginning: recruiting patients, recommending services, care documentation, medical billing, and scheduling. Let's explore those.

1.

Recruiting Patients

Marketing your clinical services to patients can be a tedious process when you try to do it the old-fashioned way. Without any kind of technology, it's practically "spray and pray." You're handing out flyers, you're telling customers at check-out, you're announcing your clinical services on your social media channels; you're telling anyone and everyone in the hope that your message will reach the right people at the right time. (How are your sign-spinning skills?)

Technology enables pharmacies to set up automatic campaigns for clinical services and recruit patients by sending SMS text messages with a link to schedule appointments. You can set up campaigns to automatically recruit patients as they are due for specific services (like a flu shot, for example). With the right clinical services platform, you can even use technology to identify clinical care opportunities automatically and enroll those patients in a messaging campaign or simply flag you to follow up with them.

2.

Recommending Services

How do you identify good candidates for your clinical program? Most PMS platforms don't have the ability to recommend clinical services for patients. You'll have to decide on your own criteria, then sort through that data on your own. It's technology, yes, but it's still a manual, time-consuming process. With the right clinical platform, however, you can know at a glance whether or not your patient has had their annual flu shot, if they are a good candidate for a diabetes prevention program, or if they are going to start a treatment that could cause drug-induced nutrient depletion. When your system provides the care opportunities for each patient, it allows you to provide better care for your patients and address needs that you could have easily missed.

3.

Care Documentation

There's a saying among care providers: "If you didn't document it, it didn't happen." Patient care planning and documentation not only enables you to bill as accurately as possible for the care you provide, it also provides a bridge between you and your patient's primary care provider. An article published in the Annals of Family Medicine states: "Coordination of care has been identified by the Institute of Medicine as a key strategy in improving the effectiveness, safety, and efficiency of the US health care system."³ Pharmacy interoperability is critical in today's health care environment; community pharmacists bridge gaps within the primary health care system, particularly in areas with a shortage of primary care providers.⁴ Documenting care in a codified, standardized, and technology-supported e-care plan improves (and truly facilitates) that interoperability.

However, if the care plan is on paper, you might run into issues. For records to be useful, they must be accessible and accurate — and both can be difficult to achieve when you only keep hard copies. (Accessible patient records are ones that can be quickly and easily found, and accurate records are ones that are always up to date. Achieving both of those goals with paper records is virtually impossible.) Also, keeping those records digitally enables you to more easily report them to organizations like CPESN.



4.

Medical Billing

Beyond providing the care, you also need to get paid for it — something that is often easier said than done. Do you remember the HCFA 1500 form? No one wants to fill that out manually. There's a reason why doctors and hospitals have entire departments dedicated to billing and reimbursements; billing for medical care is not part-time work. Without help, it is possible — and probable — that you will make costly errors while billing for clinical care. Using a dedicated billing solution streamlines the process and allows pharmacists to focus on providing the care, not getting paid for it.

5.

Patient Scheduling

Don't rely on the promise of walk-ins. Give your clinical team some predictability with a scheduling app. While you're building your practice, you'll want to limit your hours of availability to times when you will be able to provide clinical care. While walk-ins are an important part of the accessible pharmacy model, they aren't sustainable in the beginning of a clinical practice. Having a robust and user-friendly scheduling tool will create a positive shift to the appointment-based model and allow you to better accommodate and manage walk-ins.

With limited hours (due to availability of care providers), the need to schedule patients (and, eventually, to allow patients to schedule themselves) is paramount. When deciding on hours, pay attention to when you will have pharmacist overlap — one to handle dispensing, one to handle clinical services. **Think of the power behind gathering patient intake and consent outside of the pharmacy on the patient's own time.** As the need for clinical care grows, you can expand your hours over time. This appointment-based practice management is essential to the pharmacy transformation that will help you thrive and grow in this new era of digital-driven healthcare.



“Coordination of care has been identified by the Institute of Medicine as a key strategy in improving the effectiveness, safety, and efficiency of the US health care system.” ³

Annals of Family Medicine

Step 3: Build Up Your Clinical Team

With technology covered, now you need to address the personal — and personnel — element of this endeavor. Providing clinical care is going to be a big change for you and your team, and there are several things you should do to make sure all of you are ready for the transition.

First, before you involve anyone else, make sure you understand every step of the plan yourself. What are you asking your staff to do? What do they need to learn? How long do you expect the training and education process to take? What will it cost? Will you wait to introduce your clinical care services until everyone is up to speed, or will you slowly integrate team members into the process after a soft launch? **How do you maximize the entire team to practice at the top of their licence?**

There's nothing wrong with starting slowly. That's exactly what Minnesota-based Sterling Pharmacy did when they began a dedicated medication therapy management (MTM) program for their patients. "As our stores get more experience and get more efficient in the process, they're able to provide more services as they see that patients need them," said Jackie Nelson, RPh, Sterling Pharmacy's MTM manager. "The growth potential is endless."

1.

Training Your Staff

Starting a clinical practice isn't as simple as flipping a switch. Once you have your plan in place, identify who will be the key clinical players in your pharmacy. Depending on the size of your store and your staff, it could just be one or two people in the beginning — or it could be everyone.

Your clinical staff members need to be familiar with all the processes involved in providing clinical care for patients, including those beyond the actual care itself. Who will handle patient scheduling? Who will handle billing? Who will keep up with additions to patient records? Do you want to designate tasks to certain team members, or cross-train multiple team members to better cover your bases? **Can you leverage your technicians to triage patients, collect vitals, and perform testing?**

2.

Brush Up on the Basics

With your team selected, now it's time for you and your key clinical care providers to immerse yourselves in what you'll be offering. Remember, real learning never stops. With a Doctor of Pharmacy degree, there are already many clinical services you can provide for patients — but there are always more to learn about. Outside of immunization and MTM, there is a wide range of available services to add to your scope of practice. Don't be afraid to learn a new skill.

For example, do you know how to run a successful smoking cessation program? What about an effective diabetes treatment program? Do you know how to perform diagnostic tests for specific diseases? Consider dedicating some of your required Continuing Education hours to clinically focused learning opportunities.

3.

Getting Things Going

Now it's time to implement the program you built. This is where you learn how well you prepared. When implementing any new process or system, the best way to do it is one piece at a time, one team member at a time. That way, you can assess and correct issues specifically as they arise instead of having to work out where the kink in your system is.

For example, if you're implementing scheduling software, learn how to use it yourself first, then train one team member on it. (EnlivenHealth users can access training for our scheduling solution CareScheduler online.) Once they have a firm grasp on it, have them train someone else. (We subscribe to the idea that the best way to learn something is to be asked to teach it to someone else.) Once two team members other than yourself know how to use the program, begin using it in your clinical practice. Taking a slow, measured approach allows you to pinpoint potential issues before they become real problems.

Are You Willing to Fill the Primary Care Gap?

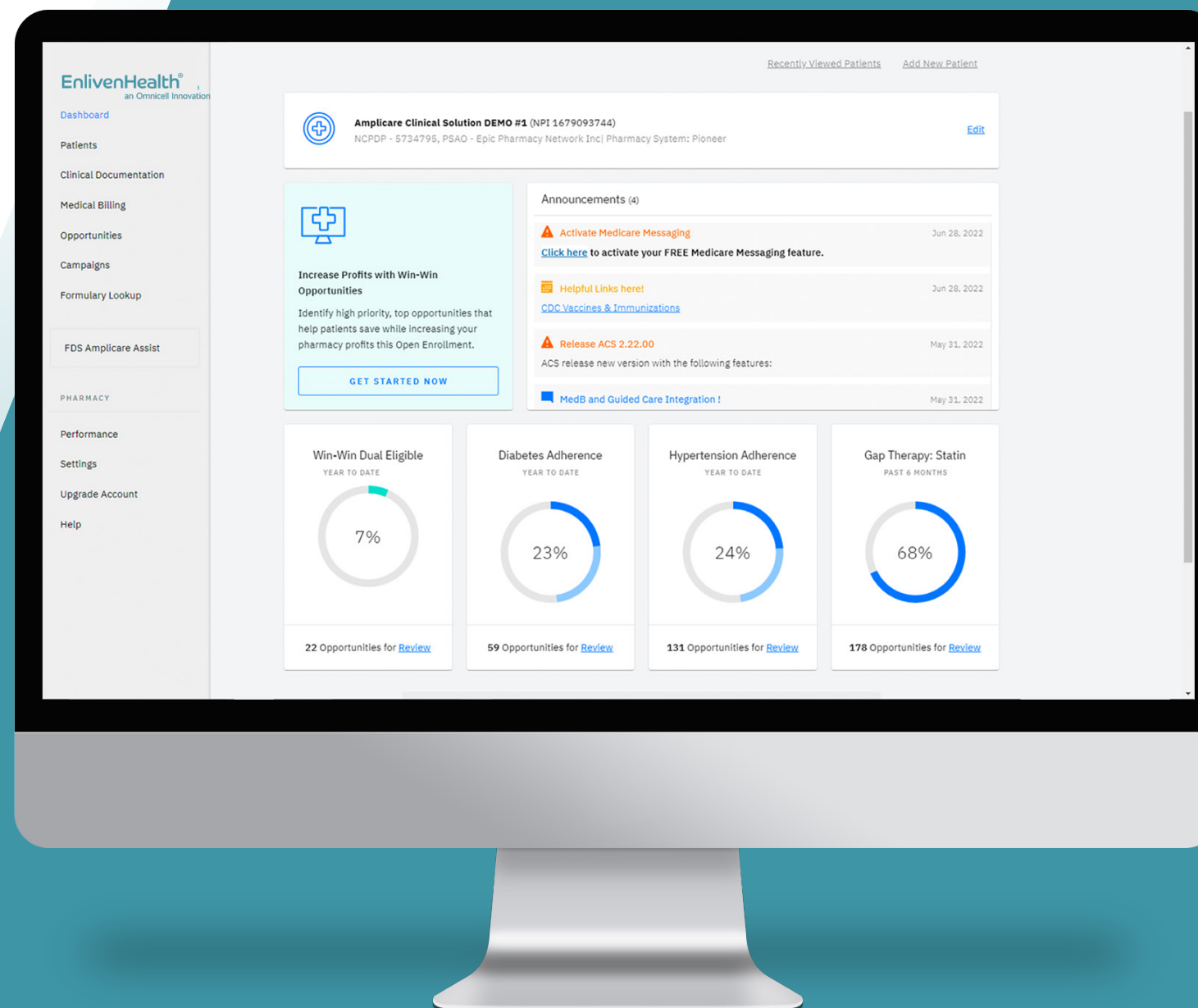
Clinical care services are the future of pharmacy. They are the core of pharmacy transformation, which is crucial to the long-term health and growth of community pharmacy. With a shortage of primary care physicians in the U.S. (and that shortage only growing over the next decade 5), Americans are turning more and more to pharmacists to fill the gap. Will you be one of them?

Transforming your pharmacy into a comprehensive community care provider is not an easy process, but it is certainly a rewarding one. In addition to new clinical revenue streams, you'll also be more directly involved in your patients' care and health outcomes. Chances are, when one of your patients can't get rid of a cough, they'd prefer to schedule a quick appointment with their pharmacist rather than spending hours in a doctor's waiting room.

Get the Right Tools for the Job

Amplicare Clinical Solution can help your pharmacy expand into clinical care with proven, easy-to-use software that simplifies and even automates some of the most laborious clinical tasks. Are you ready to get started with clinical care?

Visit enlivenhealth.co to learn more about Amplicare Clinical Solution!



Sources

1. <https://ncpa.org/expanding-diabetes-care-services>
2. <https://naspa.us/resource/pharmacist-authority-to-immunize/>
3. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5348227/>
4. <https://www.pharmacytimes.com/view/pharmacy-interoperability-challenges-and-needs-under-the-21st-century-cures-act>
5. <https://www.ama-assn.org/practice-management/sustainability/doctor-shortages-are-here-and-they-ll-get-worse-if-we-don-t-act>



About EnlivenHealth[®]

EnlivenHealth[®] builds advanced patient engagement, financial management and population health technology solutions that enable retail pharmacies and health plans to measurably improve the health of their patients and members, while ensuring the long-term health of their business. With the recent acquisitions of FDS Amplicare and MarkeTouch Media, EnlivenHealth[®] now offers the industry's most comprehensive suite of SaaS technology solutions that help retail pharmacies and health plans to transform and thrive in this new era of digital-driven healthcare. Currently, more than 50,000 retail pharmacies nationwide deploy EnlivenHealth[®]/FDS Amplicare/MarkeTouch Media technology solutions.

EnlivenHealth[®] is a division of Omnicell, Inc. (Nasdaq: OMCL), a leading provider of medication management solutions and adherence tools for healthcare systems and pharmacies. To learn more, visit [EnlivenHealth.co](https://enlivenhealth.co).