Since 2010, the Medication Assistance Program (MAP) at Smilow Cancer Hospital has charted out a successful course for covering patients’ high out-of-pocket costs.

A cancer diagnosis often delivers a one-two punch to patients: What does this mean for my health? And, how will I pay for my treatment? Through the Medication Assistance Program (MAP), Smilow Cancer Hospital has helped alleviate some of the financial concerns and burdens of thousands of patients with high out-of-pocket costs so that they can focus on their physical and mental well-being.

Each year, MAP provides between $8 and $12 million in direct financial assistance to patients with cancer and other diseases. The aid takes two forms: medication replacement, in which pharmaceutical companies provide medicine free of charge; and co-pay assistance, in which foundations or institutions cover a patient’s co-pays.

“In 2016, around 2,000 patients participated in the Medication Assistance Program,” said Howard Cohen, RPh, MS, FASHP, who overseas MAP as Smilow Cancer Hospital’s Director of Oncology Pharmacy Services. “Our numbers continue to grow. Oncology has one of the highest costs of therapy. Cost is an issue that potentially interferes with patient compliance and adherence. If a patient can’t afford the treatment, how do they get it? So supporting these patients through their therapy is paramount.”

MAP started in 2010 with one coordinator. Today, six MAP coordinators work with patients across the Yale New Haven Health System, from Smilow Hospital, to the health system’s in-house specialty pharmacy, to the regional Smilow Cancer Care Centers. Patients are referred to MAP by a variety of staff members across the healthcare spectrum: nurses, physicians, social workers, and other providers.

Patient-account representatives who check patients’ insurance coverage and request prior authorizations identify many. “If a patient receives a denial, we are the safety net that allows the patient to proceed with the doctor’s preferred course of therapy,” explained Jacqueline Caban, senior map coordinator.

Coordination is a huge understatement of the Herculean-juggling act that Ms. Caban and her colleagues perform on behalf of patients. Dozens of pharmaceutical companies, foundations, and other institutions offer either drug replacement or co-pay programs. Each program has different criteria. Some determine income limits based on the federal poverty level. Others have no income limit, but set other restrictions. Coordinators must stay alert for program changes that can, and do, happen at any given time. “Being a part of a program that understands and looks out for patients is so rewarding,” Ms. Caban said. “Patients tell us, ‘I would have had to choose whether to purchase medication or put food on the table. I couldn’t have done this without you.’”

Once enrolled, a patient can typically receive aid through the end of the current calendar year or for 12 months from the date of approval. Throughout that period, coordinators check in frequently with patients and handle the billing process for them. “We pull the explanation of benefits (EOB), along with our claim form, and send that off,” Ms. Caban said. “We can process payments so that the charges are removed from their chart within 24 hours. It’s a seamless process. We work hard to take any burden off the patient.”

For patient Edward Lent, the MAP coordinators’ concern for his well-being was as valuable as the financial assistance he received for his medication. “When you become handicapped, you have a feeling of vulnerability, that you’re in this alone,” he said. “The coordinators really reach out to you and give you a hug. They think about you as a whole person, not just a patient number. It is so much more personalized. They are in my corner, looking out for me.”

As Mr. Cohen, Ms. Caban, and the MAP team have continuously spread the word about the program, representatives from other medical institutions across the country have called and visited to learn how to establish their own versions of MAP. Ms. Caban’s expertise on the subject has made her a frequent presenter at medical conferences, and she’s developing a symposium on the program. “MAP is one of our signature programs that distinguishes Smilow from many other hospitals,” said Catherine Lyons, RN, MS, Vice President of Patient Services at Smilow Cancer Hospital. “It is a wonderful service to our patients.”

Edward Lent wholeheartedly agrees. “The MAP coordinators went through incredible leaps and bounds to find the resources that covered my medication,” he said. “They provide miracles.”

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