Insurance Marketplace off to Rocky Start
by Yimin Xu, P4
Though the government hiatus has been temporarily resolved, the federal healthcare exchange is still experiencing glitches. Called the Marketplace, it is supposedly accessible via a website: healthcare.gov. However, though it has officially been functional since October 1st, this website is far from the effortless enrollment system envisioned by President Obama and the proponents of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act.

Patients should be able to go online, input their information, and get quotes for health insurance packages from a variety of insurance companies. Choices go all the way from catastrophic coverage to plans covering an expected 90% of total healthcare costs. However, because the website does not ask for the patient’s age, premium costs are often underestimated. Other issues include trouble signing up and logging in, and incorrect information being relayed to insurance companies. With these issues, some fear that the process will self-select for the sickest members of the population, with healthier patients giving up due to the difficulties of signing up. This could lead to a downward spiral of progressively increasing premiums and healthy participants eventually exiting the Marketplace.

While the ideal of health insurance for all (or most) is admirable, these troubles leave an estimated 900,000 people in New Jersey struggling to enroll. Because New Jersey is one of the 36 states with federally-administered exchanges, the troubles experienced by the federal government could very well translate into further issues for residents. Aetna has already removed itself from the New Jersey exchange, leaving the state with only Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of NJ, AmeriHealth, and Health Republic Insurance of New Jersey. One can only hope that these issues will soon be addressed, enabling the residents of New Jersey, as well as the rest of the US, to enroll in affordable healthcare plans. Meanwhile, would you like a copy of the paper application?

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CDC, NIH Squeezed by Government Shutdown
Amidst Employee and Funding Shortage
by Melanie Chen, PP2
When the government lapsed into a sixteen day financial shutdown on October 1st, the first day of the 2014 fiscal year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) was forced to furlough 8,700 employees – about two-thirds of its entire staff. With this reduction in employee strength, the CDC ceased monitoring flu outbreaks and following up on new, unfamiliar strains of the illness.

Federal health officials said that the timing of the shutdown was problematic. CDC spokesperson Barbara Reynolds stated at the time, “Sad to say, they [the CDC] won’t be able to do [surveillance] any longer, thus preventing health care providers and consumers from attaining information on any outbreaks or new types of illnesses."

One of those key sources of information was “Flu View,” a weekly national report compiled by the CDC that synthesizes the surveillance and geographic spread of influenza across the US. “Flu View” was on halt, preventing local and state health departments from receiving updates on new influenza strains. Understandably, there were concerns that directing vaccine programs across the country could prove to be more difficult without the CDC’s supervision of flu statistics. The setback could also delay preparations for next year’s flu season, as each annual stock of vaccination relies heavily on the previous year’s particular influenza strain.

Another federal health agency, the National Institutes of Health (NIH), also felt the impact of the government shutdown. NIH continued on page 8
by Smita Jaggernauth, P1

Although the Affordable Care Act promises to cut costs, many Americans are currently struggling to meet their healthcare expenses. Prescription medication prices in particular are extravagantly expensive, especially when compared to costs in other developed countries. Desperate to find ways to afford the cost of their prescriptions, many Americans have shunned the traditional method of acquiring medication. Instead of purchasing their medications through local pharmacies, where many do not receive adequate prescription benefit coverage for their medications, internet-users are able to find the same exact medications online at competitive pricing.

For example, a year’s supply of the drug Vagifem, a treatment for menopause which costs a whopping $1,000 for the brand name version in the United States, costs only $100 for a generic in Canada. The drugs sold are cheaper generic versions and typically only differ slightly in package inserts and dosage variations. Even with the cost of shipping and taxes, the medications are significantly cheaper, causing a slow shift towards this new system of drug acquisition. Recent surveys by the Center of Disease Control and Prevention show that about 2% of adults and 5% of uninsured adults admit to purchasing their prescription drugs internationally. However, these figures are believed to be much higher considering the large amount of individuals who are reluctant to admit to online purchases.

While the majority of those buying imported medications are not using them for any fraudulent or illegal purposes, the FDA still prohibits the practice. This is due to the great difficulty of policing these medications and ensuring that they are “safe and effective.” Even if a medication was manufactured in the United States, these restrictions still apply because of the potential of the drugs being tampered with abroad. Despite maintaining its stance on the illegality of the practice, the FDA has not been very stringent in prosecuting individuals who purchase international medications. The agency does not keep records of these imports and even goes as far as stating that it “typically does not object” to people buying imported medicine for personal use under “certain circumstances.”

The system itself is not without faults though. Because most of the business exists online, it is subject to the threat of online fraud. Tim Smith, a member of the Canada International Pharmacy Association, has had to raise charges against several fake online pharmacies which try to duplicate the group’s official certification seal. As such, those who engage in online medication purchasing are advised to be extremely vigilant in verifying the legitimacy of the vendors where they purchase their medications.

Reference:


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SNPhA Kicks off Year at Children’s Health and Safety Day

by Vivian Wu, P2

SNPhA’s Rutgers chapter kicked off the start of a new academic year by participating at the annual Children’s Health and Safety Day at the BAPS Swaminarayan Temple in Clifton, NJ. This event as always generated a great turn out of eager patients and energetic children. On September 14, 2013, SNPhA members in their 2nd, 3rd, and 4th professional years set up several tables teaching young children how to live and maintain a healthy lifestyle.

At one of SNPhA’s tables, children were educated on how to measure their own pulse rate, what that rate represents, and what particular range is considered healthy and normal. After pulse rate was measured, the student pharmacists of SNPhA told the children to either run in place or do several jumping jacks in order to raise their heart rates. Once that task was complete, each of the young patients were to measure their pulse rates again to notice the increase after exercise. Several of the SNPhA members discussed with the young population about the importance of exercising to stay healthy and fit. Several of the sixth year students from SNPhA presented a poster at the event on the importance of staying hydrated and engaged the children in a trivia game asking them to estimate the amount of sugar content in various popular juices and drinks that young children are familiar with and attracted to.

SNPhA took no time off once September rolled around and started off strong with the participation in this great event. Not only was the event educational for the patient population, but it was also engaging and meaningful by the use of games and physical activity to promote wellness and health.

SNPhA Steps Out for a Good Cause

by Vivian Wu, P2

The diabetes committee of SNPhA’s Rutgers chapter has once again went above and beyond in preparation for the American Diabetes Association’s annual Step Out to Stop Diabetes Walk. On October 26, SNPhA, in collaboration with other pharmacy organizations such as APhA, NCPA, and honors society Chi Alpha Epsilon, showed their support at the walk, which took place at the TD Bank ballpark in Bridgewater, NJ.

SNPhA put together an educational trivia poster to test and improve the participants’ knowledge at the walk. The poster was titled “How Well Do You Know Your Food?” and displayed healthy food options and alternatives to certain foods. Participants were asked to choose which food was the healthier choice when presented with two different options. Through this trivia quiz, the many eager SNPhA pharmacy students communicated their knowledge in a concise and comprehensive manner to the participants. For instance, they informed walkers that a healthier, but equally satisfying alternative to ordering steak at a restaurant would be salmon, and a better snack option instead of Yoplait® Originals would be Chobani® Low Fat Greek Yogurt.

Overall, SNPhA’s participation at the Step Out to Stop Diabetes Walk had a great impact on the many participants. Members broadened the scope of walkers’ knowledge by offering diet suggestions and lifestyle changes. Using the “How Well Do You Know Your Food?” poster as a tool, students were able to teach the participants about healthier alternatives and show them that they can successfully make such choices without having to sacrifice taste and flavor.
Counterfeit Medication Problem
Highlighted at Symposium

by Ashley Brower, P4, Hannah Kim, P4, and Michelle Pernice, Pharm.D

As pharmacists, our daily work relies on the assumption that the ingredients in medications provided to patients are truthfully labeled on the packaging. This is not always true, as counterfeit medication and drug diversion has grown to be a major concern worldwide. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines counterfeit medication as medication that is “deliberately and fraudulently mislabeled with respect to identity and/or source.” The issue of counterfeit medication is particularly a concern in the continent of Africa, where it leads to an estimated 100,000 deaths annually.

The “Countering Counterfeit Medicine” symposium hosted at Rutgers on October 3rd emphasized the urgent need for awareness and action to address the fatal issue of counterfeit medications in Africa. The esteemed panelists discussed many imperative topics including how future health professionals and leaders can help fight this growing concern. The distinguished panelists included: Ekopimo Ibia, MD, MPH, FAAP; Lynn Anyaele, PharmD; Noel Ilogu, MD, MRCP; Rolande Hodel, PhD; and Rubie Mages, JD. The event was co-hosted by the Drug Information Association Tri-state Consortium (DIA-TSC), the Centers for Global Advancement and International Affairs (CGAIA) and the Rutgers Institute for Pharmaceutical Industry Fellowships (RIPIF).

The panelists highlighted that patients and health care professionals are frequently faced with the impossible challenge of detecting differences in a potentially counterfeit medication through visual inspection. With the appropriate technology, it is not difficult for someone to create, label and package a counterfeit to near perfection. Counterfeit medications may or may not have some of the active ingredient and will utilize a wide variety of potentially toxic substances that would allow the final product to pass visual inspection. The rampant distribution of counterfeits to those in need is a multifaceted global issue that cannot be easily solved. Without an easy way for identification, this highlights the importance of education and implementation of technologies to aid patients globally, especially in African countries.

Many barriers to resolving the issue of counterfeit medication were identified during the panel session. An environment where patients are not able to afford their medications creates a need that counterfeit medications are able to capitalize on. Many social and philanthropic initiatives from pharmaceutical companies were highlighted, but the void still exists. Perhaps surprisingly, legitimate medications that are obtained from reputable manufacturers are often kept at unacceptable storage conditions and may degrade the product before reaching the patient. Without a reputable manufacturer or source of medication, it is difficult to know where to refer patients for trustworthy care. Many countries in Africa also lack the government oversight and regulatory framework to properly manage this issue.

Counterfeit medication is an issue that breaks one of the basic assumptions of healthcare: medication provided to the patient is legitimate and will aim to provide a safe and effective treatment. Without a notable difference discernable by visual inspection, patients and healthcare providers in Africa are unable to identify counterfeit products. One method to consider in the effort to minimize the use of counterfeit medications is to go directly to the communities, educating and generating awareness about the existence of counterfeit medication and the potentially dangerous impact. Manufacturing companies are also developing advanced methods to identify legitimate medications. In addition, by fostering African manufacturing and proper storage facilities and identifying legitimate trade routes, patients may in the future be able to trust their medication suppliers. Awareness and collaboration from all sides is necessary if an attempt to counter counterfeit medication is possible. As a healthcare professional, it is important to be aware of this issue and recognize that counterfeit medication is a problem worldwide.

As future pharmacists, we have a responsibility to remain aware of potential concerns that may impact our patients. Although more prevalent in distant countries such as Africa, one may be surprised to learn that there are instances of counterfeit medication in the United States. Internet pharmacies are a major source and are a place that a patient may turn to if they cannot afford their medication. If a patient reports new and unexpected side effects from a medication, an important question may be the source of their medication. As you progress in your career, it is also important to always identify legitimate wholesalers and sources of the medication stocked in the pharmacy. Furthermore, proper storage and care of the medications are crucial, in addition to making sure expired medications are pulled from the shelves. If compounding, it is important to focus on detail because measuring errors may lead to sub-therapeutic medication being dispensed. Counterfeit medication is an opportunistic problem, which thrives in situations where quality and safety are sacrificed.

The DIA Tri-State consortium is taking on this difficult issue by spreading awareness and identifying steps forward. If you are interested in getting involved in the DIA-TSC please contact: dia.tristate@gmail.com.
An Interview with Bayer RIPIF Fellows

by Jazmin Turner, P3 and Maryann Torres, P3

It is no secret that the pharmaceutical industry is evolving as a non-traditional career path of choice for pharmacists, and it seems that the key into the industry for pharmacy students is landing a postdoctoral fellowship following graduation. The Rutgers Pharmaceutical Industry Fellowship Program began in 1984 with one fellow and a partnership between Rutgers University and two pharmaceutical companies. The program now has 80-90 fellows annually and it partners with 14 pharmaceutical companies on the East and West Coast, such as Bayer, Bristol-Meyers Squibb, Merck, Novartis, and Pfizer. Fellows can be involved in essentially every step of the drug development process, from positions in clinical research to positions in regulatory affairs. Each company offers something a little different so it is up to the interested applicant to find their best match. Due to limited supply of fellowship positions available and a growing demand from pharmacy students, creating a standout application becomes increasingly challenging.

Kyechin “Kye” Chen and Meena Ramachandra are both Rutgers Pharmacy graduates and currently fellows at Bayer HealthCare Pharmaceuticals. Dr. Chen is a second year fellow in Payer Marketing and Dr. Ramachandra is a first year fellow in Regulatory Affairs. For both, their interest in pursuing a fellowship and future career in the industry stemmed from exceptional rotation experiences; however, their backgrounds differ.

Dr. Chen chose a wide variety of rotation sites during his P4 year to help him decide which career path he would find the most interesting. In addition to clinical and retail experiences, he also chose industry rotations at Sandoz and Merck. To him, the most fulfilling rotation experience occurred while on a marketing rotation at Sandoz, where he learned about market research, business intelligence, and forecasting.

Today, his position in Payer Marketing at Bayer allows him to expand on those experiences. During his time on campus, Dr. Chen enjoyed playing Ultimate Frisbee as a member of Rutgers’ Club Ultimate.

Dr. Ramachandra participated in both pharmacy and non-pharmacy related extracurricular activities while at Rutgers. She was co-chair of Heartburn Awareness for the student chapter of the American Pharmacists Association (APhA), a member of Alpha Zeta Omega (AZO), and a member of the Institute for Domestic and International Affairs (IDIA). In AZO, Dr. Ramachandra had key roles in the outreach and fundraising committees to help support Dance Marathon. In the summer after her P1 year, she had the opportunity to intern at Novartis in Drug Safety. During her APPE rotations, she appreciated the clinical aspects of hospital pharmacy, but the large impact of drug development in the industry resonated more with her.

Each December, pharmacists and student pharmacists across the country attend Midyear, a convention sponsored by the American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP), to enhance their knowledge in the profession of pharmacy and to participate in networking activities. Midyear is a crucial event for student pharmacists to engage with employers searching for prospective fellows and residents. For Dr. Ramachandra and Dr. Chen, the experience was overwhelming. For students attending Midyear, they recommend talking to peers who went to Midyear in the past, attending the professional events set up by EMSOP, presenting a personable, down-to-earth, and confident personality, and most importantly, the willingness to learn. Dr. Ramachandra likens Midyear to a speed dating event in which students and employers search for who has the most chemistry. As Dr. Chen sees it, he clicked well with preceptors not so much because of his past experiences, but more so because of how well their personalities matched.

Dr. Ramachandra believes that what makes you stand out is rarely what is on your curriculum vitae. A student should not get involved with organizations and take on leadership positions just for the sake of their resume. Participate in activities that have meaning to you and develop yourself as an individual. Dr. Chen also notes that candidates at Midyear are not all that different. Personality is a very important aspect of the interviewing process. He advises not to limit yourself, get involved, and see what is out there. When he initially began rotations, he thought he wanted to be a pediatric clinical pharmacist, but he went in a very different direction. If he had not been willing to explore, his career goals would not have changed in a way that best suited him.

As fellows, there is no typical work day – Continued on next page
there may be a day of constant challenges posed by the FDA, vendors, or upcoming projects followed by slower days. Projects are always changing, so it is important to be able to prioritize what will overall work best for the company. In addition, fellows work with others inside and outside of their respective departments, making communication crucial.

One of the challenges that pharmacists continually face is the public’s perception about the profession. Although the pharmacist’s role in healthcare is increasingly expanding, there is a widespread lack of knowledge about what pharmacists can contribute. The pharmaceutical industry works to help change those perceptions. There is a group called Pharmacists at Bayer, which is a close-knit group of pharmacists whose goal is to promote the profession. They hold various lunch-and-learns where people within industry come to learn about what pharmacists can do. During American Pharmacists Month, there are fun facts on bulletin boards and televisions within the company. Dr. Chen believes that you can show people by doing. When it comes to meetings and projects, there are many opportunities to make good impressions on the various teams, further showcasing the important contributions that pharmacists can make to the industry and to healthcare as a whole.

The Rutgers Fellowship Program and the pharmaceutical industry are constantly evolving. One of the biggest concerns is how the Affordable Care Act will change the landscape of healthcare and no one is quite sure what its impact will be; however both Dr. Ramachandra and Dr. Chen are interested to see how it will shape the future of industry. Dr. Ramachandra believes that patient advocacy groups may play a bigger role in the future. Patient advocacy groups raise awareness about medical conditions and advocate for access to certain therapies. They can have an impact on every step of the drug life cycle, from clinical trial design and recruitment to drug access and reimbursement. Health Economics and Outcomes Research (HEOR) is also a rapidly expanding area in industry as it helps drug and device manufacturers quantify the economic value of their products. There are a lot of opportunities for pharmacists to get involved; however extra schooling is often required. Degrees such as a Masters in Public Health (MPH) or a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) would be particularly useful for those interested in HEOR.

For those interested in finding out more about what industry has to offer, Fellowship Information and Networking Day (FIND) will be held on Friday, November 15, 2013 from 3:30 pm - 8:00 pm in the BCC MPR. Companies such as Bayer, Novartis, Merck, and Bristol Myers Squibb will be in attendance. Attendees can complete the first step of the interview process before Midyear, learn more about different positions, and network with current fellows, program directors, and company representatives. FIND is open to all interested Doctors of Pharmacy and Pharm.D. candidates. However, the evening networking reception with current recruiting companies will only be open to 2014 candidates. A separate panel will be held in room 122 for candidates in other years of pharmacy school. For more information or to RSVP, please go to: http://pharmafellows.rutgers.edu/find.php.

References:

by Courtney Tomaselli, P1, Yuming Ha, PP2, and Sibin Stephen, P2

Many students who come into pharmacy school are not well educated about what career opportunities are available to them, simply thinking that their only options are to work in a retail pharmacy or a hospital. When most people think of a career as a pharmacist, they think mainly of a job incorporating the dispensing and patient care roles, but do not consider the option to be actively involved in the drug development and marketing processes. But in fact, a career in the pharmaceutical industry is an attractive option for pharmacy graduates, as it gives pharmacists the chance to work in a variety of different areas of drug development and marketing.

Because many students and even some professionals are not entirely aware of the opportunities that are available to them, Dr. Jim Alexander quickly saw the need for a national organization to be formed that would serve the needs of industry pharmacists. This led him to form the Industry Pharmacists Organization, or IPhO, in October 2012. The major goals of the organization are to serve as a connection among industry-based pharmacists, to foster professional development among both students and professionals, and most importantly to advocate for the role that pharmacists play in industry. Because of the unique skills that pharmacists have, an increased awareness of how valuable these professionals are will allow for more advancement into leadership positions within the industry.

Following formation of the national organization, the Ernest Mario School of Pharmacy piloted its own chapter this fall with the intention of informing pharmacy students of the opportunities available to them in industry, as well as providing them with valuable resources and advice for breaking into the profession. The organization’s general interest meetings, panels, and other events all serve to educate students about career and fellowship opportunities, as well as what skills will make students more attractive to future employers.

The first general meeting of the organization featured speakers Dr. Jim Alexander, Jerry Silverman, and Alex Slanix, who discussed the value of pharmacists in industry and how IPhO can provide valuable resources to help interested students break into the profession.

Within the student chapter, several committees have been established to serve the general goals of the organization, which include Professional Development, Event Coordination, Outreach, Scholarly Activities, and Publications. For those with any interest in industry pharmacy, or even simply with a curiosity as to what the career path entails, there are plenty of opportunities to become involved, so please either email us at rutgersipho@gmail.com, “like” us on Facebook, or visit the national website at www.industrypharmacist.org to learn more.
The Importance of Being Ernest

Exploring the EMSOP Network: Where can a Pharm.D. from EMSOP lead you?

Mayez Enver, PharmD, EMSOP Class of 2012

by Jennifer Kim, P3

I had the pleasure of interviewing Mayez Enver, former Chapter President of American Pharmacists Association Academy of Student Pharmacists (APhA-ASP), and graduate from Ernest Mario School of Pharmacy, Class of 2012. Dr. Enver is a passionate and positive individual who believes mentoring and educating those who are pursuing the profession of pharmacy is essential. During his school career, Dr. Enver always had the mindset that you should take any opportunity that is given to you and you should have a positive attitude about your work. He is currently a Pharmacy Manager at Target in Watchung, New Jersey. This is Part I in a two-part interview with Dr. Mayez Enver about his school career and current career.

As a second year pre-professional student, Dr. Enver became interested in the Rutgers University APhA-ASP Patient Counseling Competition. At the time, he had no experience with the clinical professors within the pharmacy school, but he reached out to them for assistance, and spent his entire winter break preparing for the competition. The prize for winning the school-level competition was an opportunity to compete at the National APhA-ASP Patient Counseling Competition and a paid, round-trip ticket to San Antonio, Texas where the competition was located. Fortunately, all his hard work paid off, and Dr. Enver won first place at the local level and left for San Antonio for the national conference. Unfortunately, he did not place first, but it was a semi-finalist. However, according to Dr. Enver, this was a pivotal event in his school career – he realized how important APhA-ASP was as an organization. Dr. Enver realized the point of pharmacy school is not just to graduate successfully, but that everything that he would do as a student could help shape the legacy of the pharmacy field.

At this point, Dr. Enver became hooked. He chose APhA-ASP because of how patient-care oriented the organization was – he saw how its health initiatives and educational events positively affected local communities. Desiring to get more involved, at the end of PP2 year he ran for the position of president-elect for Rutgers APhA-ASP. While moving onto P1 year, the president at the time had to step down due to personal reasons, and Dr. Enver was given two options: he could remain president-elect for the next year or if he felt ready, take on the position of president. Dr. Enver chose to take on the challenge and become president of APhA-ASP as a P1 student.

One initiative that Dr. Enver was really passionate about was promoting American Pharmacists’ Month (APM). He personally felt that all the organizations in the pharmacy school should endorse and get involved with promoting APM campus-wide collectively, rather than individually. At one Pharmacy Governing Council meeting prior to APM, Dr. Enver gathered all the presidents of each organization to discuss his idea, and they decided to collectively push for APM as a school. The efforts of all the presidents resulted in hundreds of students wearing t-shirts supporting APM, an article in The Daily Targum and in local newspapers, and the deans and other Rutgers officials getting involved. The Vice President of the National APhA organization even wrote a letter to one of his APhA-ASP officers commending and recognizing them for prioritizing that as their main event, a point of great pride for Dr. Enver.

Further along in Dr. Enver’s school career, he applied for Phi Sigma Lambda, the Pharmacy Leadership Society (PLS) and was selected. Through PLS, everything he had done so far associated with APha-ASP, his other positions, and work experience came to an apex; he was able to network with nationally known professors and get more professional refinement in his school career and curriculum vitae. Dr. Enver worked alongside renowned professors, such as Dean Barone, and learned many things through networking and hosting events. All these things helped him throughout his career and his rotational experiences have benefited him thus far in his career post-graduation.

In addition to his school career, Dr. Enver had three jobs. He was a Pharmacy Technician/Intern at Target Pharmacy, a hospital Pharmacy Technician at Hackensack University Medical Center, and a General Store Manager at Domino’s Pizza®. He also volunteered as a Sunday School teacher at a local mosque. As a student, Dr. Enver felt that his work experience was so valuable. He personally feels that it is one of the most important components that converts a pharmacy degree to a profession. In his opinion, many people would find his position at Domino’s Pizza® a bit unusual, but Dr. Enver found that many of the social skills, financial, and business management abilities that he utilizes now came from those work experiences.

As a graduate, Dr. Enver would definitely recommend students to take every opportunity they get. He advises: “Never say no to something, and you want to plan as many things as you can because you never know what chance will close. Do whatever you can, and work whenever you can because somewhere down the line, everything that you do will “click” and catapult you towards your path.”

Read more about Dr. Enver’s career in Part II of this interview in the next issue.
Government Shutdown Impact on CDC, NIH
director Francis Collins estimated that for every week of government shut down, the agency’s renowned research hospital would have to turn away approximately two hundred patients, 15% of whom are children hoping to enlist in experimental treatment studies.

“This is the place where people have wanted to come when all else has failed,” Collins told the Associated Press. “It’s heartbreaking.”

The shutdown hit the NIH at a particularly vulnerable time for scientific research. Collins said this year is a historically bad one for scientists attempting to win funding for biomedical research projects. Earlier this year, the NIH lost $1.5 billion due to automatic spending cuts known as the sequester, a government movement aiming to slash $1 trillion from the national budget in an effort to reduce the national deficit.

Much of that slash hit science funding platforms, meaning hundreds of projects around the country failed to receive or lost funding sources. For the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30, 2013, the NIH was able to fund only 16% of grant applications received, compared to 1 in 3 applications funded a year ago.

“If you expected new treatments for cancer or a new universal influenza vaccine or discovering the causes of autism were going to move forward at the maximum it could, that will not be the case,” Collins said. “This is a profoundly discouraging day.”

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Of Antipsychotics and Medicare

by Yimin Xu, P4

I am currently a P4, doing my rotation at Healthcare Quality Strategies Inc., (HQSI), New Jersey’s Quality Improvement Organization (QIO). There is a QIO in every state. What this means is that the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) has selected HQSI to be the organization leading healthcare quality projects that result in improved healthcare for New Jersey’s Medicare residents.

Current goals include minimizing adverse drug events and optimizing patient care. QIO tasks include forming and training teams in healthcare facilities across the state, working with physicians offices as well as reviewing Medicare appeals or complaints filed. I am helping with the project that focuses on minimizing the use of antipsychotics in the elderly Medicare population, especially for dementia-related symptoms such as aggression and confusion.

The efforts of HQSI and healthcare providers across the state have paid off. In a group of 6 nursing homes HQSI is working with, antipsychotic use rates are down almost 30% in 9 months. In addition, off-label use of antipsychotics is down 25%.

I have heard many heartwarming stories of how alternative non-drug therapies, such as music, can lead to a better quality of life. One elderly woman was aggressive and difficult to care for, even by her own husband. However, when the nursing home staff compiled a playlist of her favorite songs and began to play it for her, she stopped yelling out and smiled. Her husband cried tears of joy, and the woman finally found some peace of mind. Music therapy allowed her to be slowly weaned off her antipsychotic medication.

This project shows what HQSI and its partnering consultant pharmacists and nursing home staff can achieve, slowly but surely improving the quality of life of nursing home residents one at a time. In fact, New Jersey now has one of the lowest rates of antipsychotic use in the nursing home Medicare population, coming in at fifth best in the nation. It is truly an example of how healthcare should and can work, and while the job of optimizing patient care is far from over, I am proud to be able to contribute to a brighter tomorrow.

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2. Data on file at HQSI.

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