Pharmacy Insights

An in-depth look at pharmacy programs and industry trends.

Managing accessibility and cost of gene therapies

This edition of Pharmacy Insights is written by Clinical Pharmacist Ahmed Aly of the Pharmacy Account Management Liaison team.

Ahmed Aly

Gene therapy is an innovative approach that focuses on modifying a patient's genetic makeup to treat or potentially cure diseases. By replacing, deleting, or inserting new genetic material into a patient's genome, gene therapy aims to correct or replace faulty genes responsible for disease development. This cutting-edge treatment has shown promising results in addressing a range of previously untreatable or difficult-to-treat genetic disorders, including certain types of inherited retinal diseases, some forms of cancer, and blood disorders like sickle cell anemia. Its ability to potentially provide long-lasting or permanent effects with a single treatment marks a significant advancement in treating rare diseases.

However, and despite its potential, gene therapy is still a growing field facing several challenges, particularly concerning its cost and accessibility. The high price of gene therapy treatments, often running into the hundreds of thousands to millions of dollars per patient, is a major concern for self-funded employer health plans, healthcare payers, and patients alike.

At Blue Cross, we understand the importance of making lifesaving treatments accessible and affordable. Our comprehensive gene therapy management program is designed to enhance accessibility for our members while reducing costs. Through the Gene Therapy Management program, our dedicated drug pipeline work group is constantly monitoring the market for emerging gene therapies. This proactive approach allows us to stay ahead of the curve, ensuring that new treatments are promptly evaluated for potential inclusion in our coverage.

We also conduct thorough clinical reviews of newly developed gene therapies to verify their safety and efficacy. Stringent medical policies and clinical guidelines are established - ensuring these costly drugs are prescribed only when clinically necessary. Additionally, our clinicians evaluate medical records, including genetic test results, to ascertain the appropriateness of gene therapy treatments based on our medical policies, guiding patients to the most suitable care options.

New gene therapies are seamlessly integrated into stop-loss coverage upon approval for Blue Cross medical coverage, providing peace of mind for employers and patients alike. The Synergie Medication Collective is a key part of Blue Cross' gene therapy management program, initiated through collaboration among various Blue Cross plans in January 2023. This partnership augments the work the Blue Cross team is already doing to help drive down cost for these expensive medical benefit drugs.

The first element of the Synergie Medication Collective is the Gene+ Risk Protection. This feature complements our existing stop loss solutions by providing financial safeguards for every approved single-administration gene therapy, thereby reducing employer liability.

The second element is the Patient Navigation Program, which enables Blue Cross and Blue Care Network to ensure negotiated caps on administration of these very complex treatments and the negotiated discounts with our health system are the most favorable rates available to prevent member disruption.

Lastly, the Gene+ Outcomes Program, developed in collaboration with Evio, leverages outcomes-based contracts with manufacturers. Given that gene therapies are typically "one and done" treatments, these contracts allow for partial reimbursement to the group if a patient experiences a relapse post-treatment.

Our mission is to revolutionize healthcare by ensuring our members have access to advanced, lifesaving treatments that are both effective and affordable. We are also committed to innovating and managing costs for groups, empowering members to lead healthier, longer lives.