

## Managing Medication Samples in Healthcare Practices

### Question

What safety precautions and risk management strategies should healthcare practices consider when maintaining and dispensing medication samples?

### Answer

Some healthcare practices provide free medication samples as a service to patients. Offering medication samples can be beneficial in many ways, such helping offset the costs of prescription drugs, allowing patients to start treatment immediately, reducing the inconvenience and financial burden associated with adjusting patients' medications, and giving providers access to the latest drug therapies.<sup>1</sup>

Maintaining and dispensing medication samples is not without risks though, and a lax approach to samples can lead to patient harm and liability exposure. To mitigate these risks, healthcare practices should consider the following strategies:

- Include guidance specific to medication samples in the practice's written medication safety policies and procedures. All guidance should conform to federal and state pharmaceutical regulations.
- Specify in written medication policies that prescribing medication samples is limited to healthcare professionals who are (a) legally permitted by state law to perform this task and (b) properly trained and credentialed.
- Ensure that appropriately licensed providers are requesting medication samples in writing from pharmaceutical representatives. These representatives should not provide samples without a provider's written request.<sup>2</sup>

- Make sure providers and staff members are aware of the organization’s policies and procedures related to medication samples, and provide prompt updates when changes occur.
- Develop strategies for storing, tracking, and managing medication samples, such as:
  - Developing a process for receiving medication samples and introducing them to the inventory.
  - Documenting all medication samples that the practice receives, including lot, National Drug Code, and expiration date.
  - Implementing medication storage best practices, such as organizing products by expiration date, grouping medications by drug group (rather than name), making sure labels are visible, and separating “look-alike, sound-alike” medications.
  - Segregating medication samples from the rest of the inventory and making sure only authorized personnel can access medication storage areas.
  - Routinely inspecting medication samples in the practice’s inventory, and disposing of any expired or damaged samples in an appropriate manner that complies with federal and state regulations.
  - Documenting the destruction or disposal of sample medications.
- Monitor medication sample prescribing practices, and verify that the provision of samples is approached with the same safety considerations as prescribing other medications (e.g., thorough patient evaluation, review of potential contraindications, and adherence to the standard of care).
- Make sure sample medications dispensed to patients include detailed labels that are similar to what they would receive at a pharmacy and what is required by law (e.g., drug name, patient’s name, date, strength, dosage, frequency, quantity, and expiration date).
- Document the provision of samples in patients’ health records, including manufacturer, drug name, strength, lot, dosage, frequency, quantity, and expiration date. Also document any patient education and discussions about benefits, risks, alternatives, and potential side effects.
- Make sure a method is in place to identify all patients receiving a particular medication and lot number in the event of a recall; for example, the practice might want to maintain administrative logs or include a field in the electronic health record system.

Offering medication samples to patients is a routine practice in many healthcare offices. However, these samples require the same safety and risk considerations as other medications in the organization's inventory. Developing appropriate policies and processes related to medication samples can help reduce improper prescribing, adverse events, and liability exposure.

## Resources

- [MedPro Group: Checklist: Medication Inventory Management for Healthcare Practices](#)
- [National Coordinating Council for Medication Error Reporting and Prevention: Recommendations for Avoiding Medication Errors With Drug Samples](#)
- [Pharmacy Purchasing & Products: Safe Management of Medication Samples in the Ambulatory Care Setting](#)

## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> Business Matters. (2020, March 12). *Giving out free samples of branded drugs: Do the benefits trump the negatives?* Retrieved from <https://bmmagazine.co.uk/business/giving-out-free-samples-of-branded-drugs-do-the-benefits-trump-the-negatives/>

<sup>2</sup> 21 U.S.C. § 353(d)(2)(A)(i).

---

This document does not constitute legal or medical advice and should not be construed as rules or establishing a standard of care. Because the facts applicable to your situation may vary, or the laws applicable in your jurisdiction may differ, please contact your attorney or other professional advisors if you have any questions related to your legal or medical obligations or rights, state or federal laws, contract interpretation, or other legal questions.

MedPro Group is the marketing name used to refer to the insurance operations of The Medical Protective Company, Princeton Insurance Company, PLICO, Inc. and MedPro RRG Risk Retention Group. All insurance products are underwritten and administered by these and other Berkshire Hathaway affiliates, including National Fire & Marine Insurance Company. Product availability is based upon business and/or regulatory approval and may differ among companies.

© 2024 MedPro Group Inc. All rights reserved.