

# Finding programs to help patients pay for drugs is now much easier

By Cori Vanchieri

**T**here are several hundred drug assistance programs designed to help people who cannot afford prescription drugs. But even though scores of pharmaceutical companies, as well as private and public sector groups, offer help, many patients—and their doctors—either don't know about the programs or don't take advantage of them, discouraged by the daunting tangle of eligibility criteria and paperwork involved.

Recently, it has become much easier to gain access to these programs from which many patients can obtain drugs for free, or at very low cost.

This past spring the Pharmaceut-

ical Research and Manufacturers of America—the trade group of the pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries—launched the Partnership for Prescription Assistance (PPA). The Partnership was designed to help people navigate the myriad programs through “one-stop shopping.” In late July, PPA announced a near doubling of the number of programs—from 275 to 475—it provides access to.

### Help is here

Through a national advertising campaign, a website, and toll-free call center with operators able to field inquiries in English, Spanish, and 150 other languages, PPA is putting the word out that it can help people find financial assistance in obtaining prescription drugs.

Each of the nearly 500 programs (and 2,500 medications) that can be accessed through PPA has its own eligibility criteria and terms of use. One example is Together Rx Access, a free card that provides a 25%–40% discount on more than 275 brand-name prescription drugs as well as a variety of generic drugs for uninsured individuals who are not eligible for Medicare. Tamoxifen, ondansetron (Zofran), letrozole (Femara), and paroxetine are some of the cancer-related drugs discounted through this program.

To find a program that is best for any given individual, patients simply call the PPA toll-free or go online to provide the following information:

- Age
- State of residence
- Estimated gross annual household income

- Number of people living in the household
- Name of the medicine they are currently taking or have been prescribed
- If applicable, health insurance and/or prescription coverage eligibility.

All responses are kept confidential. An application with the patient's information is given to the health care provider who signs the form, attaches the prescription, and mails it to the company sponsoring the assistance program for which the patient is eligible. Medications are either sent to the health care provider's office or directly to the patient's home. Some programs, such as Together Rx Access, provide a pharmacy card that patients can use at their local drugstore. One drawback: there can be a delay in obtaining the medications, although PPA's first report on the program states that efforts are made to distribute the drugs as quickly as possible.

In PPA's first 100 days of operation, more than 600,000 patients were matched to prescription assistance programs.

### No sign of a slowdown

Although prescription drug spending is a relatively small proportion (11%) of national health care spending, it is one of the fastest growing components, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation in Menlo Park, California. National prescription spending increased 15% from 2001–2002, compared with an 8% increase for physician and clinical services and a 10% increase for hospital care.

Three factors are driving increases in medication spending, according to Kaiser: Increased utilization accounted for 42% of the overall increase from 1997 to 2002; newer, higher priced drugs replacing older, less-expensive drugs accounted for 34% of the increase; and manufacturer price increases for existing drugs accounted for 25% of the rise.

### Choose your program

#### Partnership for Prescription Assistance

Provides access to 475 patient assistance programs, including government programs.  
1-888-4PPA-NOW (1-888-477-2669)  
[www.pparx.org](http://www.pparx.org)

#### Together Rx Access

Specifically designed for uninsured individuals who are not on Medicare.  
1-800-444-4106  
[www.TogetherRxAccess.com](http://www.TogetherRxAccess.com)