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The Role of the Pharma Industry in Superseding Outdated Medical Practices

Ross Maclean, Executive Vice President | PRECISIONheor
Phil Cyr, Senior Vice President | Precision Value & Health
Ray Roth, Senior Advisor | PRECISIONvalue

Ross Maclean Phil Cyr Ray Roth

The randomized controlled trial (RCT) stands as a cornerstone in drug development. It's the yardstick that measures novel medicines before they obtain regulatory approval. Today, a peek into **ClinTrials.Gov** showcases a surge in biotech innovation. But a pertinent question arises: how frequently are older, now outdated technologies phased out?

Casting Light on Superseded Health Technology

Over the last two decades, methods to evaluate health technologies have drastically improved. Sophisticated techniques, like network meta-analyses, are now widely used to compare a variety of treatments, from lifestyle interventions to pharmaceutical drugs.

The pivotal work by Prasad et al. on "medical reversal" has drawn attention to technologies that, though superseded, are still in routine use. A significant 146 such entities were identified in his 2013 research.[1]

Moreover, a 2017 JAMA article underscored the pressing need to abandon practices that no longer serve a purpose given the availability of newer, better alternatives.[2]

The US Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) role here cannot be understated. From a regulatory viewpoint, the FDA is actively involved in multiple aspects of health care including educating prescribers about new drug risks and benefits, using big data analytics for the early detection of potential safety concerns, maintaining high safety standards, and implementing revisions to the accelerated approval process.

Why the Reluctance?

The phenomenon of "heterogeneity of treatment response" illustrates that individuals may respond differently to the same medicine. Given this variability, clinicians might be wary of abandoning a drug that, in select cases, could still be effective.

Moreover, established medical processes sometimes deter the adoption of newer methods. Some health care providers, due to their expertise, still achieve satisfactory results with older techniques. However, clinging onto the “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” mindset can sometimes miss the opportunity to improve patient health or at least reduce potential harm to patients.

Pharma Can Lead the Way

The pharmaceutical industry has a pivotal role in pushing forward medical innovation. If George W. Merck’s words, “Good medicine is good business,” hold true, biopharma companies are uniquely positioned to champion high-quality care. Here’s how:

1. **Evidence Creation:** When a pharma company is launching a new drug, can they not also provide data on outdated, inefficient alternatives (beyond the RCT comparator)? Doing so would spotlight the inefficiencies of outdated health technologies and steer the focus towards more effective treatments.

2. **Engagement:** Pharma companies can step beyond immediate product-related commercial interests. Instead of focusing solely on their new drug, they can educate health professionals about broader inefficiencies and gaps in current health care practices.

3. **Collaboration:** Teaming up with organizations already pushing for change can amplify the impact. For example, the ‘Choosing Wisely’ program by the American Board of Internal Medicine (ABIM) is a perfect example of a campaign aimed at curbing low-value care.

Summary

The health care system is often slow to adopt innovative practices, but the delay in moving away from outdated methods can be just as prolonged. This lag stalls the adoption of game-changing treatments that may improve patient health and deliver value to society, and may potentially harm patients.

The pharmaceutical industry, with its robust R&D mechanisms and access to a global network of expertise, stands at the forefront of health care evolution. Beyond merely developing new treatments, they have the capability to lead in policy advocacy and thought leadership, driving a paradigm shift from redundant practices to novel interventions. The inertia in the medical field, rooted in tradition and clinical familiarity, requires a robust counterforce.

This counterforce can be the collective endeavors of pharma companies, armed with compelling data and a commitment to patient-centric care. The role of these companies extends beyond drug manufacture. It involves shaping the very ethos of health care, ensuring that the practices of yesterday do not impede the promise of tomorrow’s innovations. The path forward is not without challenges, but with collaboration and commitment, the industry can usher in a renaissance in medical practice.

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