

Jeff Bernhard:

Hi, I'm Jeff Bernhard, Senior Vice President of Commercial Markets at Highmark. Welcome to Hitting a Higher Mark. In this podcast, we explore the topics that are transforming how healthcare is delivered and paid for. Today, we will specifically be discussing provider partnerships. We have two special guests here today with me to expand on this very important healthcare topic. First, we have Gerry Walsh, who is the Vice President of Provider Contracting and Relations at Highmark. Next, we have Dr. Mark Wendling, Executive Director of Physician Hospital Organization at the Lehigh Valley Health Network. Welcome, and thank you for joining us. Let's get started on today's topic.

Jeff Bernhard:

Gerry, first question for you. Why are partnerships between health insurers and clinical care providers so important?

Gerry Walsh:

Thanks, Jeff. I think the value they bring is a couple of things. They create a focus on managing the health of a population. So, instead of just focusing on people when they're sick, it allows us to focus on keeping the healthy healthy, supporting those chronic conditions to help them manage their illness, and effectively managing those that are sick. And, we do that through collaboration.

Gerry Walsh:

But, I think the collaboration is key because it allows us to do a couple of things including we have... health plans are focused on trying to manage their members in their health. Obviously, the providers are focused on managing their patients. It's their patient, our member. And together, we can find what's best in breed to give the best experience without duplicating to that patient. And, a lot of that could be enabled by the amount of information that we can share together about that patient to give a better point of view.

Gerry Walsh:

And then, kind of lastly, I would say it really drives alignment, both clinical and financial alignment, between the parties, so that we're all really rolling in the same direction.

Jeff Bernhard:

Thanks, Gerry. Mark, do you have anything you'd like to add about the importance of provider partnerships in the healthcare industry?

Mark Wendling:

Yeah, thanks. I think what we've learned is that when you really do look at the population from... we get both claims and clinical information. Claims certainly is provided to us from Highmark through our relationship. And for the vast majority of the population that we serve, we combine that with our clinical information, and what we have there is our ability to both manage the population proactively rather than waiting for people to contact us.

Jeff Bernhard:

Thanks. So, what value does this partnership bring to Highmark's members and Lehigh Valley's patients?

Gerry Walsh:

I'll give you my thoughts, Jeff. So, I would say a couple of things. You've heard us mention the words "collaboration" already, but I would say the clinical collaboration that it brings is, I think, a real differentiator and to our members. And, what I mean by clinical collaboration is you have the clinicians from Highmark, and the clinicians from Lehigh Valley who are actually touching patients, getting together, discussing how best to care for a patient while they're in the hospital, how to help them get home, what's the next level of care. We refer to them as huddles. They're literally getting together and talking about what's in the best interest of that member and patient.

Gerry Walsh:

And, that's really enhanced by, Dr. Wendling already touched on it, the information sharing that we can do. So as an insurer, we have a tremendous amount of information through claims data about the care that a patient has received both while they're at somebody like Lehigh Valley, and when they're at other places. And, Lehigh Valley has a tremendous amount of clinical information about that patient and their electronic health record. And through our partnership, we're able to blend that information together and give a much better view of the patients so that when the provider, in this case whether it be the physician or somebody else's, is seeing that patient, they have a much broader view of their total health and can really improve the care they deliver to them.

Jeff Bernhard:

Thanks. So Mark, how is Highmark's partnership with Lehigh Valley Network change the actual delivery of care and the experience for the patient?

Mark Wendling:

This is a very involved answer, but it starts with our patients, frankly, getting better outcomes. And when I say better outcomes, I'll say things like we have higher rates of screening mammogram, we have greater rates of elderly patients getting screened for fall risk, or being screened for depression for example. The other thing that is amazing is we've been able to do those better outcomes, particularly in the last year, year and a half, at a cost, in terms of the expense per member, that has been lower than what the trend otherwise would have been. And, in some populations it's actually been negative.

Mark Wendling:

So, to have a negative trend, while you're improving the care of people, both preventatively and in people with disease, that's an accomplishment. And, Highmark's added a lot, both of of human element, but their expertise on the technical side, to enable us to be able to do that. So, it really does start with that partnership.

Jeff Bernhard:

Gerry, can you give us a few real life examples of success from this provider partnership?

Gerry Walsh:

Part of entering into this relationship with Lehigh Valley, we built a suite of products around the partnership. So, we have products that we enroll members in that have a higher level of attention and focus based on the benefit design, the network design, the level of clinical collaboration we're able to embed, and we can compare that to our other products. And, what we've seen so far through that

partnership is that we've driven real results for our customers and for their members. Things like we've seen a 23% savings in medical and drug costs for the members who are in those partnership products compared to other products. Seen 20% less use of the emergency room, 19% less surgeries, 3% higher immunization rates. Those are just examples of the cost care management that you can achieve while at the same time improving the quality of care and the experience of the member.

Jeff Bernhard:

Those are great results. So, how are we ensuring that our partnership is continually adding value for patients and members? In other words, how do you anticipate this partnership will change over time to accommodate evolving patient needs?

Gerry Walsh:

Well, I believe we'll accommodate that by... this partnership is it's a living relationship. It's not just a contract. So, insurers and payers have always had a contract between them that define the relationship. That's not what we have here today. We have a living relationship. It's about collaborating and problem solving. We work together. We sit down regularly. We look at what's working, what's not working. We learn from it. We make adjustments. So, we've created a relationship that allows for true partnering, not just a contract. And, we recognize it's a journey. It's not a sprint. We're not going to solve everything in the first year or two, and we haven't solved everything, although we've made tremendous progress. But, it's a long-term commitment to say, "Let's learn from each other. Let's collaborate. Let's do best in breed and let's produce outcomes that we can then deliver back to our mutual clients."

Jeff Bernhard:

Do you have any final thoughts on how the partnership might evolve as time goes on to best serve patients?

Mark Wendling:

Yeah, I certainly do. I think one of the things that we continually try to effect is to reach a point in our collaboration where we know that we're actually beating the illness to the punch. One of the things that the team, our team and the Highmark team, are both very strong at is analytics and using information to drive the change and the outcomes that Jerry highlighted. So, I think there's a myriad of examples. I think we continually want to get ourselves a place where we can demonstrate that we've actually prevented. It's one thing to react to illnesses and things that have already happened, and we're doing really a great job at that, I think, now. So, I think moving forward, the challenge is to do that next level of management. And, I'm very confident with strength in our partnership, as Jerry commented on, that we'll be able to actually do that. And, at that point, I think we can both say, confidently, we hit the mark, so to speak.

Jeff Bernhard:

Jerry and Mark, thank you both for joining me to discuss provider partnerships. It's clear after today's call what the real value is when providers, and carriers, or payers, join hands for the common good of improving outcomes and improving care for patients. It's very exciting. These types of relationships are critical because they can improve capacity to manage the quality and cost of healthcare through clinical and financial alignment. I'm Jeff Bernhard and thanks for listening to Hitting a Higher Mark.