

DM DISEASE MANAGEMENT ADVISOR™

VOLUME 12

• NUMBER 3

• MARCH 2006

Emotional, behavioral issues targeted

New web-based program gets patients primed for DM

When disease management efforts fail, it is often because the patient is not ready or receptive to making changes. And studies suggest that this is an all-too-common occurrence, resulting in poor outcomes and wasted resources. It's a tough problem to get around because there are often many different factors or barriers involved, but developers at Ann Arbor, MI-based HealthMedia believe they have devised a cost-efficient solution to this dilemma that offers benefits to both payers and providers.

HealthMedia specializes in the development of online DM and wellness programming, so it is no surprise that the company's approach to this problem is in the form of an Internet-based program called Care for Your Health™. Specifically designed for patients with any type of chronic illness, the program focuses not so much on the specifics of any disease, but rather on the emotional and behavioral factors that play such a strong role in a person's ability to develop effective self-management skills.

Care for Your Health is just now being released to the marketplace, but results from pilot testing of the approach at four large health plans suggest that it may well provide a critical element of care that has been missing for a large percentage of chronically ill patients.

A 'pre-processor' to DM

No one program will work for everybody, but developers at HealthMedia saw evidence that traditional DM messaging was simply falling on deaf ears for a significant number of patients, according to **Ted Dacko**, the company's CEO. "We know why people will and won't change their behavior, and we recognized that classic DM approaches were preaching treatment strategies to people who weren't ready to accept their conditions. They did

not have the right motivation, they didn't have the right self-confidence, and they didn't have the skills to use the programs that were developed," he explains. "As a behavioral health company, it was perfectly obvious to us that you needed to put these things on the front end of DM in order to boost the efficacy rates of traditional DM programs."

While the program may well offer benefits to chronically ill patients at all acuity levels, Dacko emphasizes the program's value at the front-end of the DM process. "Consider it as a pre-processor to DM that gets the patient in the right frame of mind to then go off and deal with their condition," he says. "It is not a classic DM approach where we are trying to just focus on how to treat diabetes. We are actually teaching patients what their role is in chronic illness self-management so they can take the next step."

For example, the program delves into such issues as the doctor-patient relationship -- helping patients communicate more effectively with their providers, and offering strategies on how to take a more active role in their care. Additionally, the program covers emotional issues such as depression and stress, and it includes guidance and tools relevant to pain management, fatigue, medication compliance, and social support.

"The program is designed to help the person with chronic illness understand and accept their condition, and the role they play on the treatment team," notes Dacko. In fact, he stresses, the aim of the approach is to equip patients with the skills they need to become the quarterback of that team.

Individualized feedback

In order to tailor the guidance and support offered through the program to each individual's needs, the process begins with a health risk assess-

ment (HRA) that queries patients on a range of issues such as their experience with providers, adherence levels, their understanding of the disease process, self-efficacy, and their emotional health. "Based on how participants answer those questions, the technology writes an individual plan for them that is literally down to the sentence fragment or word level based on those responses," explains Dacko, noting that health care professionals have essentially trained the technology to respond to the various answers in specific ways.

For example, if a user has indicated on the HRA that she does not feel that her provider spends enough time with her, and that she does not understand her provider's instructions, the patient may receive a suggestion that she prepare a list of questions before her visits, as well as guidance and strategies for communicating more effectively with the provider.

Alternatively, if a patient indicates that side-effects or medication costs are a problem, he will receive guidance on how to address those issues. "It is literally like the patient is working with a counselor who has asked him a series of questions around these issues and then provided specific advice," notes Dacko. "The technology tailors [the response] in such a way that it looks like a personal letter or program from a counselor. Many patients have no idea that it is actually written by computer technology." (See Figure 1.)

Impressive outcomes

While the intensity of the program is focused on the front end where patients complete the HRA and then received a tailored plan, it is not unusual for users to return the web site for several months, either to explore new content areas or to take advantage of self-management tools that the program provides. These include various tracking instruments, a medical library, exercise videos, and even recipes.

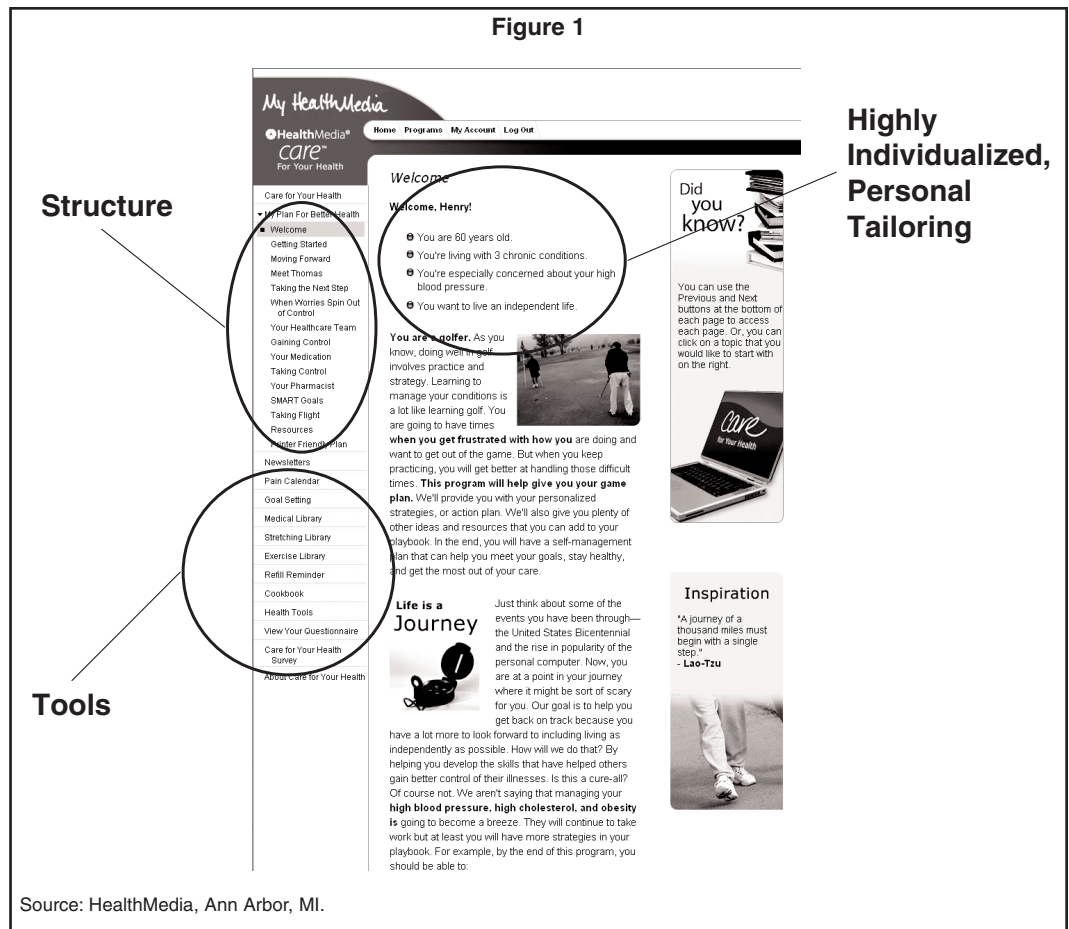
"The focus of the program is around a structured intervention which is longitudinal, but it is not something that they have to come back to over and over again," says Dacko. "Once we teach

patients these self-management skills, then we are going to try and move them into making sure they are talking to their DM counselor, funnel them into another web-based program, or otherwise move them along the continuum."

Dacko acknowledges that there are always some people who will not respond to an automated or web-based approach. However, he suggests that the reach of such programs is so large, and the cost of delivery is so economical, that this type of option is an attractive alternative for health plans or large employers. Further, pilot testing of the program on chronically ill members of four large health plans has yielded impressive early results based on self-reported data, including high satisfaction rates, improved patient-provider relationships, and improvements on a number of parameters related to patient self-efficacy. (See Figure 2.)

Sustained motivation

Based on these results, at least one of the health plans that participated in pilot testing of the program, Pittsburgh, PA-based Highmark Blue Cross and Blue Shield, is now making the program available to its entire book of business. Interestingly, while Highmark already offers a full complement of traditional DM services, adminis-



trators believe that Care for Your Health will enhance what is already in place.

“What is different about this program is that it digs a little deeper into the motivation and self-efficacy piece,” explains **Anna Silberman**, MPH, VP of preventive services for Highmark BCBS. “I think most diabetics are somewhat familiar with the information that will keep them from developing complications, and keep their disease from progressing as quickly as it otherwise would. This program, though, deals with the barriers that we all have inside us that keep us from doing what we set out to do.”

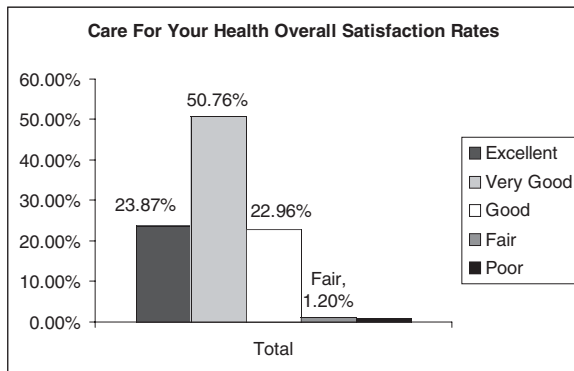
Of particular interest to Silberman, for example, were the outcomes indicating that participants

were more motivated at the end of the program than they were in the beginning. “When you look at the typical result of a health management or health promotion program, what you find is that going into the program you have practically 100% attendance, and people are at the peak of motivation,” she explains. “Yet, in this program, from 90 days out people were more motivated than they were in the beginning, and that is across the board. That is very telling about the impact and the efficacy of a program.”

The value of prevention

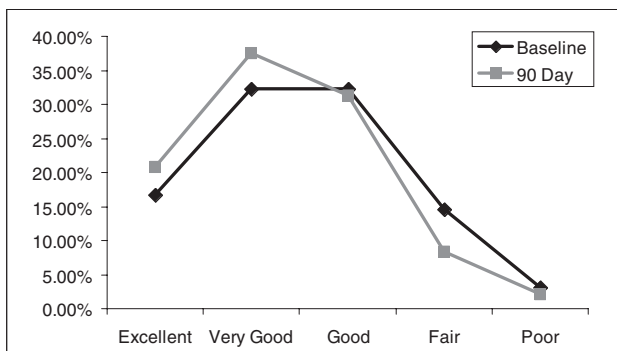
By addressing chronically ill patients at lower-acuity levels, Dacko suggests that programs such

Figure 2

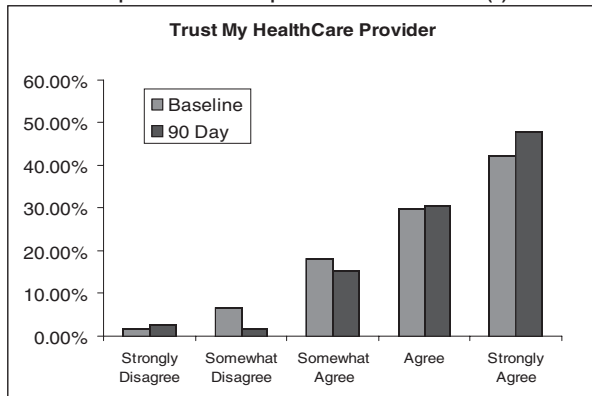


97% of Care™ for Your Health participants rated the program Good, Very Good, or Excellent

Reported Quality of Health: Baseline vs. 90 Day



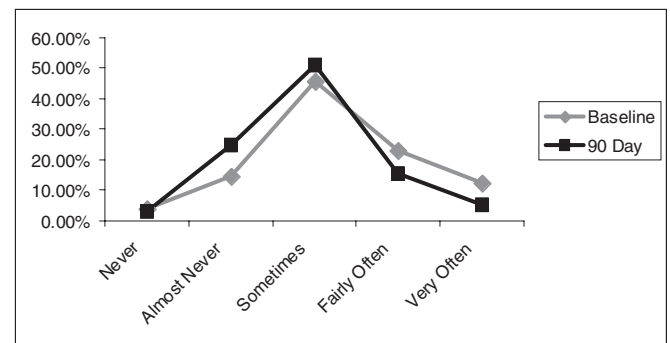
Improves Relationship With Healthcare Provider(s)



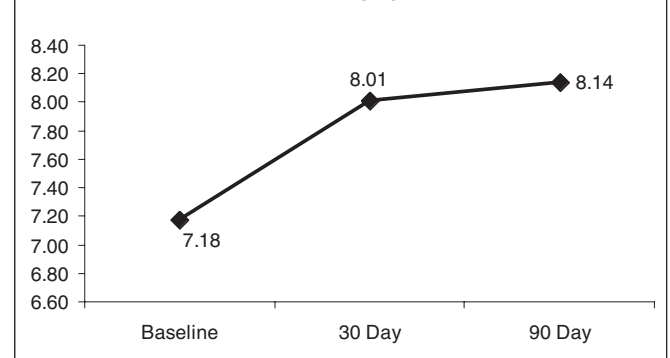
Source: HealthMedia, Ann Arbor, MI.

Figure 2 (continued)

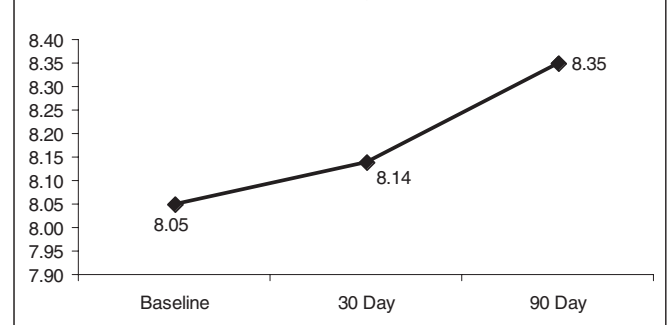
Improves Health and Stress Management



Overall Confidence in Managing Chronic Condition



Overall Motivation to Manage Chronic Condition



Source: HealthMedia, Ann Arbor, MI.

as Care for Your Health have the potential to deliver huge savings over the long term. "A traditional DM firm is only going to focus its outbound calling on people with high acuity; and [patients] are going to get structured interventions that are pretty high quality," he explains. "What we are trying to do is prevent the acuity Level 1 one patients from becoming Level 2s, and the acuity Level 2s from becoming 3s. And that is where the rise in DM is right now."

Dacko emphasizes that a web-based option

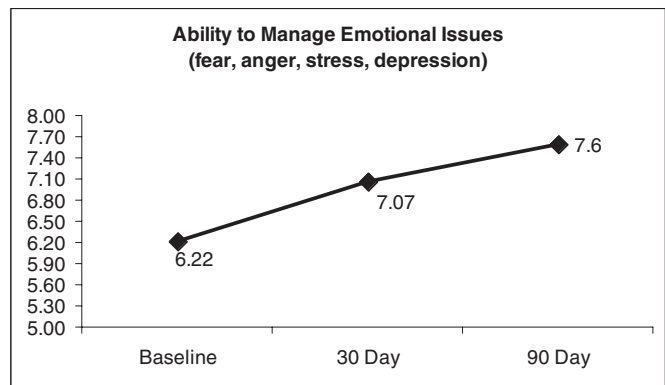
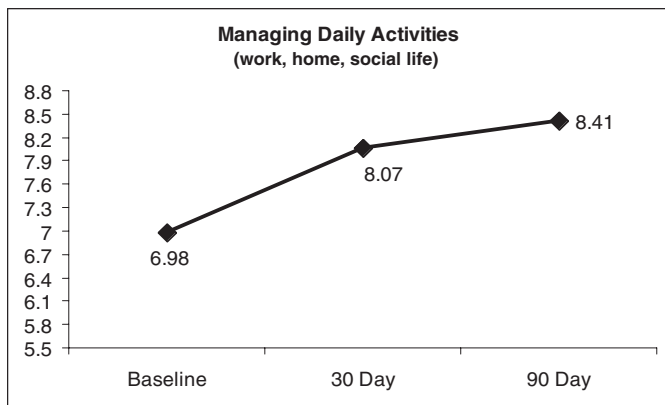
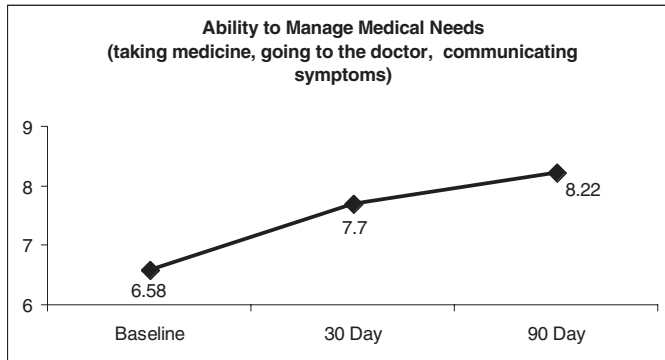
may be the most effective way to reach the acuity Level 3 patients who are often reluctant to engage with a nurse counselor. "They may be too busy, or too ashamed, or they just won't talk to somebody," he says. "In these cases, this program can be applied to acuity Level 3 patients as a secondary strategy."

Believing that the program does, indeed, offer benefits to patients at both ends of the acuity spectrum, Silberman is planning to make it available to any Highmark member with a chronic condition.

"I am often asked how we can afford to provide these kinds of interventions to our members, and if you look at the literature, the real question is how can we afford not to?" she stresses. "How can we afford not to do our very best to prevent what is often preventable? That is really the fundamental principle behind all of this. People really do deserve to know all of their options, and they deserve access to credible information that can help them become expert patients."

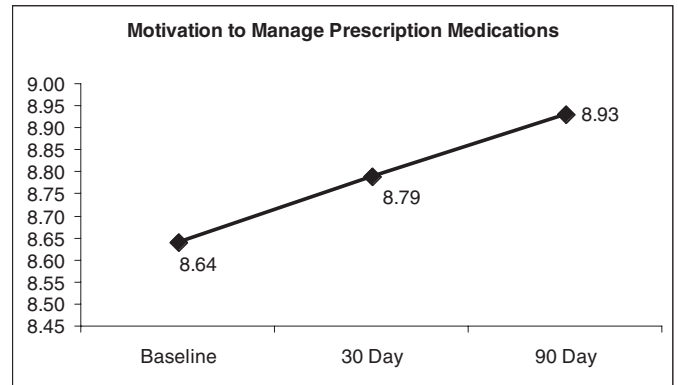
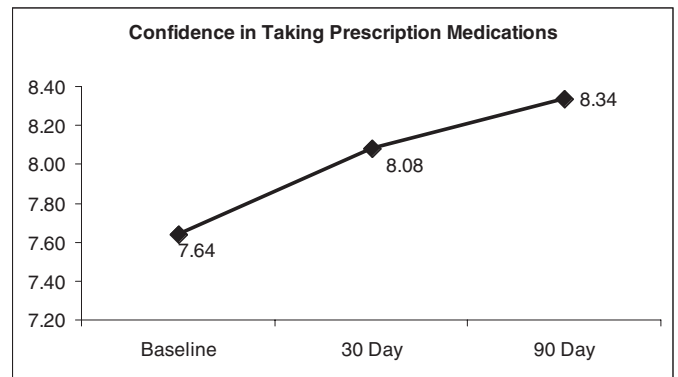
Editor's note: For more information about Care for Your Health or any other programs offered by HealthMedia, visit the organization's web site at www.healthmedia.com. ♦♦

Figure 2 (continued)



Source: HealthMedia, Ann Arbor, MI.

Figure 2 (continued)



Source: HealthMedia, Ann Arbor, MI.