

Claudia Burroughs: Jack of all Trades Becomes Master of Infusion Reimbursement

By Jeannie Counce

Where do you go after you've worked almost every facet of home infusion? The reimbursement department, of course. Reimbursement is where it all comes together, according to Claudia Burroughs, Reimbursement Specialist at Advanced Infusion Services. Understanding how the pharmacy works, how payer contracts are structured, and even how deliveries are made all come into play when working claims and appealing denials.

"Claudia has accumulated a vast quantity of knowledge over time and she's competitive," says Randy Fasnacht, RPh, Director of Advanced Infusion Services. "She doesn't like to lose and she uses that knowledge to her advantage."

"The most important part of a home infusion business is the reimbursement department, because if you don't get paid, you won't be in business for long," asserts Burroughs. A veteran of the industry who got her start as a pharmacy technician, Burroughs transitioned to home infusion from the hospital setting in 1988. After two years of compounding for a small provider, she teamed up with two colleagues—a nurse and biller—to start their own company, Infusion Partners. "We did everything with just three employees and a pharmacist," she recalls.

Doing business in the pioneering days of home infusion meant being a jack of all trades, continues Burroughs. "I mixed medications, made deliveries, met patients in their homes, negotiated contracts with payers—you name it," she recalls.

In the mid-1990s, as price compression began to reach the budding home infusion industry, Burroughs transitioned from the pharmacy into reimbursement. Payer contracts were more complex, reimbursement rates were shrinking, and there were more and more hoops to jump through to collect payment for services. Infusion Partners' reimbursement person was lagging and Burroughs, a self-proclaimed stickler for details, stepped in.

"I took over supervising that job function because I'm so detail oriented and I felt our reimbursement wasn't effective," Burroughs explains. "I decided we could find another pharmacy technician, but it was becoming a daunting task to do the billing right."



Claudia Burroughs, Reimbursement Specialist at Advanced Infusion Services

While she mostly enjoys the challenges of reimbursement, she concedes that it's also a frustrating job. "Just because you send in a claim doesn't mean you're going to get paid. And, just because they pay you, doesn't mean they'll let you keep the money. Everything has to be right from beginning to end," she explains.

Burroughs' strength lies in getting all the various elements right. To do it, she draws on years of involvement in different aspects of this unique delivery model. "Having that experience in the pharmacy and other parts of the business helped because I know what's involved and how the system work."

From there, Burroughs slogged her way up the learning curve. “If we were denied on a claim, I was on the phone to the payer to find out why,” she recalls. “I used to have a folder for each payer where I would keep notes on their requirements and the things I needed to remember about submitting claims to them.”

In 1997, Burroughs and her partners sold their company, and she went to work in the reimbursement department at Advanced Infusion Services which is part of Visiting Nurse Services in Northeast Ohio. “I’ve seen all the transitions,” recalls Burroughs. “When I started in this business, you could send in a bill and simply get paid. Then, there was case management with per patient capitated rates, and managed care with networks.” She also watched the industry unite as providers joined together to advocate for their services and standardize how they should file claims. “I remember when there were no codes—everyone had their own—and then, NHIA released the National Coding Standard. A lot has changed!”

Experience Pays Off

The wisdom and depth of understanding that come with years of being steeped in industry details have made Burroughs an integral part of Advanced Infusion Services’ team, according to Fasnacht. “I don’t panic too much when our pharmacist is out of the office, but I panic when Claudia is on vacation,” he quips.

Burroughs specializes in knowing and meeting payment requirements. “She’ll gather information and documentation, explain how the orders should be written, contact the physician for progress notes—everything to get the payment from insurance,” observes Cindy Reedy, Customer Service Representative at Advanced Infusion Services. “She can navigate it all

because she understands the payers and the coverage. She can navigate the patient cases too,” adds Reedy.

Just as Burroughs kept notes as she was learning the ropes, she shares what she knows with her colleagues in the interest of improving processes. “If she asks for something or tells us to document something, she’ll explain why,” says Reedy. “She truly wants to educate us so we’ll know for the next time.”

Having a well-trained staff that understands reimbursement pays off, according to Fasnacht. “Our customer service surveys include a question that asks patients to rate how well their bill was explained and if they could understand it. We always score very high on that metric,” he explains, noting that dealing with patients and financial matters involves sensitivity and is a difficult area in which to excel. “I used to have other people talk to the patients, but Claudia took that over which has greatly increased patient satisfaction,” observes Fasnacht.

“Burroughs acts like an advocate for patients,” he adds. “She’ll offer a payment plan, coach them on how to deal with their insurance company, or help them access assistance programs. It can be frustrating and confusing for them and she is sensitive to their concerns,” observes Fasnacht.

Grit and Persistence

Burroughs is naturally equipped for reimbursement with the right personality traits for the job, say her colleagues. “She’s persistent,” explains Fasnacht. “If you look up ‘persistent’ in the dictionary, her picture is there 100 times.” This comes in handy when dealing with payers, he adds. “Lots of payers plan on you not taking it that far—just giving up—and Claudia won’t do that,” he brags.

“She’s so accurate and detail oriented—to a degree that I cannot comprehend,” adds Reedy. “She knows all

the details of each patient’s case and the coverage guidelines for each payer,” she says.

“Claudia has a near-photographic memory,” confirms Fasnacht. “If I ask her, ‘can we do something,’ she’ll say, ‘according to Medicare memo XYZ, dated XX, we can.’ She can cite chapter and verse,” he marvels.

“My attention to detail is probably exhausting to other people,” concedes Burroughs. “But there are so many things to keep straight. If you don’t do it right, when it gets to the audit stage, the payer can recoup your payments,” she explains. But that rarely happens at Advanced Infusion Services. The provider has been through four Medicare audits and won them all.

“I keep up with the Medicare regulations and payer contracts,” says Burroughs, who regularly attends webinars on reimbursement topics and reviews Medicare guidance, local coverage determinations (LCDs), and other resources. “I do like a challenge, but sometimes working in reimbursement is more frustrating than challenging.”

Exasperation sets in when decisions on the payer side don’t make sense, continues Burroughs. “There are too many variables in the weeds and that’s a real disservice to the patients—their co-pays, deductibles, and out-of-pocket expenses are getting so high.” Unfortunately, according to Burroughs, the bottom line for providers is that they have to collect that patient portion to keep the doors open. “My job every day is to be sure the claim is filed right; we are paid for our services; the payer pays according to the contract; and the patient doesn’t pay any more than he or she has to.” ■

Jeannie Counce is the Editor-in-Chief of INFUSION. She can be reached at Jeannie.Counce@NHIA.org or 406-522-7222.