

Only 50%: A Failing Grade for a Pharmacy Chain

Category: Pills

written by Karen E. Lasser | December 8, 2023

Due to the war in the Middle East, my family and I had to cancel a much-anticipated visit to Israel this holiday season. Instead, we decided to fly to Bogota. My late father grew up in Colombia, but I've never been there; we hope to visit my great-grandmother's grave and my father's old neighborhood.

Given constantly evolving infectious risks, we made an appointment before our departure for my older daughter to visit an infectious diseases specialist. The physician sent prescriptions for acetazolamide (for altitude sickness) and azithromycin (for traveler's diarrhea) to a local pharmacy—part of the country's largest chain.

On a chilly Saturday morning in December, I visited the pharmacy to pick up these medications, as well as two prescribed by another doctor: ondansetron (for nausea) and a colonoscopy prep kit. Anticipating a long wait, I brought my *New York Times* and joined the line at the prescription counter. Interestingly, only 50% of the prescriptions from each physician's office had been filled; the pharmacy said they hadn't received the prescriptions for the ondansetron or acetazolamide. I carry a tattered copy of my medical license so decided to take matters into my own hands and prescribed both medications.

I sent my husband to the pharmacy to pick them up this week. The ondansetron was ready, but there was no record of the acetazolamide prescription. Again, a 50% fill rate!

Today, I again brought my *New York Times* and waited in line. The woman in front of me was beside herself. She was flying to India in four hours, and the pharmacy had not received the malaria prophylaxis prescription her physician had sent. I offered to prescribe it for her, but she did not recall the name of the medication. I, however, was more successful this time: on the third attempt, I received the acetazolamide for my daughter.

Often in my clinical practice, patients present with high blood pressure or uncontrolled diabetes because they cannot obtain their medications. My experiences trying to get my own daughter's medications afforded me a new understanding of the barriers my patients face. I hope the pharmacy (you know who you are!) will increase staffing levels and address the problems and frustrations all patients are experiencing. As my high-school-age daughters could tell them, a 50% is an F!

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