

Safe dispensing

New QR code for controlled substances is one pharmacy's effort to bring awareness to the opioid crisis

by Chris Linville

In Mayank Parikh's opinion, health care (and in particular medication adherence) is a multi-step process, and pharmacists are a key link, sort of the "hinge" that makes it work. Through their doors come prescriptions from physicians designed to keep their patients healthy. Unless the patient has been steered to mail order, perhaps, their pharmacist explains what the medication does and how it should be taken before it goes out the door. But it's more than that.

"Pharmacists ensure that prescriptions are accurately and legally labeled for each and every patient," says Mayank, co-founder of Super Health Pharmacy in Staten Island, N.Y. "It stands to reason that prescription labels placed on medications play an extremely critical role in allowing patients safe administration of their medications along with medications of loved ones."

Safe prescribing is a common phrase, but Mayank says that's just part of it. "You don't really hear the term safe dispensing," he says. "It's not used as often as it needs to be."

With that in mind Mayank and his pharmacy team have created auxiliary labels that have QR codes that direct patients to resources and education. The pharmacy worked with a local non-profit organization called Tackling Youth Substance Abuse, which administers the Just Ask campaign, which focuses on the dangers of youth substance abuse. Mayank says TYSA was instrumental in helping coordinate the rollout and securing funding for the distribution of the labels all throughout Staten Island.



CONTROLLED SUBSTANCE. DANGEROUS UNLESS USED AS DIRECTED
CAUTION: Federal law prohibits the transfer of this drug to any person other than the patient for whom it was prescribed

linktr.ee >

.5 1x

SLO-MO VIDEO PHOTO PORTRAIT



“Pharmacists ensure that prescriptions are accurately and legally labeled for each and every patient. It stands to reason that prescription labels placed on medications play an extremely critical role in allowing patients safe administration of their medications along with medications of loved ones.”

“We were able to successfully launch controlled substance stickers in collaboration with TYSA,” he says. “With the Just Ask campaign, the QR code that was tailored for the auxiliary label directs patients toward drop box locations, medication storage, Narcan training and accessibility, among other things.”

Mayank also credits Ginny Mantello, a physician who serves as director of health and wellness with the Staten Island Borough President’s Office, along with the Staten Island District Attorney’s Office, for their support.

“The success of our plan would not have been possible without them,” he says.

Mayank, who received his PharmD from the University of the Sciences in Philadelphia in 2013, founded Super Health Pharmacy with Parthiv D. Shah, RPh, in 2016. It is part of the DMS family of pharmacies. Mayank and Parthiv own several dozen stores, along with their partners, primarily in the New York metropolitan area. The Staten Island location is the headquarters and has about 30 staff.

Like many pharmacists, Mayank is looking to redefine how the profession is perceived.

“I’m an avid believer that we have to get away from the traditional pick, stick and lick model of pharmacy,” he says. “We have to be seen as health care destinations

and COVID-19 allowed that. We’ve been able to step up to the plate and become more of a health center as opposed to just a pharmacy. If we continue that then the opportunities are going to be limitless.”

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Mayank has always been community oriented. He is a second-generation health care provider and cites his late father, Dr. Ashok Parikh, as his greatest inspiration. He says his father convinced him to go to pharmacy school and was a big influence in acquiring his own pharmacy.

In 2016, with a rising number of drug overdoses on Staten Island, Mayank knew he had to step up. He worked closely with the New York City Department of Health to make Narcan available to anyone who would be suitable for it. More than 250 members of the community were trained to identify an overdose and administer Narcan that year through his efforts. Four lives were saved by Narcan dispensed through the pharmacy. Still, it’s an ongoing battle. Although it’s the smallest of New York’s five boroughs in terms of population, Staten Island sees an outsized number of opioid-related deaths in the city. In 2021, Staten Island had the second-highest rate of overdose deaths per 100,000 residents at 39.3, topped only by the Bronx, which had 70.6 overdose deaths per 100,000 residents. Manhattan had 32.8, Brooklyn saw 28.8, and Queens had 21.4.

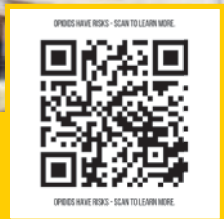
“Opioid deaths have doubled in recent years, and overdoses are through the roof,” Mayank says. “We had a strong focus on COVID and we did amazing work, but now we have to regroup, rethink and kind of handle this next crisis that’s right in front of us.”

Auxiliary labels have been available for years, but Mayank says not much has changed about them. That’s when he started thinking about QR codes.

“These auxiliary labels have been on bottles forever, so we were asking how we could get this link out?” he says. “We’re in 2023, QR codes are everything, right?”

Mayank considered different options. “If I put it on the cap, that might not fly too well because some people have customized caps,” Mayank says. “But if I put it on something that’s mandated by law, like a controlled substance sticker, we might be able to get that underwritten by the local health department or district attorney. And what is mandated by law in New York state is that every single controlled substance has to have a controlled substance sticker.”

As it turns out, Mayank was able to get the local district attorney’s office to sponsor stickers not only for his pharmacy but other pharmacies throughout Staten Island.



A QR code created by Super Health Pharmacy directs users to numerous resources and educational materials. You can try it yourself by opening the camera on your phone and pointing it at the QR code at right, then clicking on the link that appears. Student pharmacist Dean Ayesh demonstrates how it works.



“There’s a plethora of opportunities out there. You just have to be opportunistic; you have to position yourself at the right time and in the right place and be ready to roll.”

Once the QR code is scanned, it displays information about properly disposing expired or unwanted prescription drugs, Narcan training centers and calendars, help links, and much more.

“There’s just an infinite amount of resources on the sticker,” Mayank says.

From concept to completion Mayank says the label creation process took about six months as the pharmacy was working with a number of non-profit partners to have as robust a code as possible.

FEEDBACK

Mayank says the sticker was a big hit with his own patients at his pharmacy in Staten Island. He then partnered with 10 other pharmacies on Staten Island that already had drug disposal drop boxes in their pharmacy.

“The feedback has been really nice,” he says. “People are really interested in it.”

Mayank says controlled substances are just one part of his plan.

“We have a patent pending on the QR on an auxiliary label, but we’re going to expand it past the controlled substances,” he says. “We’re looking at skin care medication or oncology medication. We need to give people access to 24-7 resources, because that’s the day and age that we’re in. We’re working on some temperature regulated labels as well, that’s kind of in the pipeline. We’re really excited. These are kind of feel-good type of projects for me;

it’s not just a business thing. What can we do to advance our profession and help patients at the same time? And everything is at your fingertips today, so at the least we should have this opportunity for patients.”

Mayank says he wanted to roll out the sticker program wherever he thought it could have a positive effect.

“It’s very fresh, it’s hot,” he says. “We’re now starting to get the word out and we wanted to make sure it got a good response. And we have a great response now. We’ve tested it with ourselves, we’ve tested it with other pharmacies, and there’s definitely a need for it.”

Mayank also appreciated the autonomy in putting the project together.

“It was a collaborative effort with local non-profits,” he says. “But that’s the beauty of being an independent pharmacist! You can do these things, you can work with local non-profits, you can work with the district attorney, you can ask for funding. You can’t do these things working in the chains.”

IRONS IN THE FIRE

At the moment Mayank has a number of irons in the fire. His pharmacy is a member of CPESN® USA and he is a strong supporter of its network model. He is also working on a number of grant initiatives, including vaccine equity and social determinants of health.

Diabetes is another focus. In the United States 37.3 million people have diabetes, accounting for 11.3

percent of the population. Among them, 28.7 million people have received a formal diagnosis of diabetes, while an additional 8.5 million individuals remain undiagnosed. Furthermore, 96 million people have prediabetes, indicating an increased risk of developing the condition. Diabetes is considered the most expensive chronic condition in the United States, with an annual total cost of \$327 billion.

Mayank is well aware of those numbers and is trying to do his part to help. The pharmacy does A1C testing on site. It recently received accreditation status from the Association of Diabetes Care & Education Specialists. It’s also a participant in the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention’s National Diabetes Prevention Program, a partnership of public and private organizations working to prevent or delay type 2 diabetes.

“We’re kind of closing the full circle on diabetes,” Mayank says. “We have lifestyle coaches on staff, nurses on staff. We can test for A1C. If we have patients with diabetes, we offer a diabetes education program. If they are pre-diabetic they can be put in a diabetes prevention program. And if they are fine we’ll just follow up with them.”

Much of what Super Health Pharmacy has accomplished is through grants with various entities. Mayank is an enthusiastic proponent of the process.

“Absolutely,” he says. “There’s a plethora of opportunities out there.



At top, Robin Smith, RN, manages a dose pack. Below, chief pharmacist Mikbail Kozlov, PharmD, counts medication. At right, a technician prepares the special QR code label for a prescription bottle.



“We are only scratching the surface of what services pharmacists in an independent community pharmacy setting can provide. My father’s words still echo in my ear as we positively impact the different communities we serve: ‘Help others and do the right thing.’”

You just have to spot the opportunities, position yourself at the right time and in the right place, and be ready to roll. Never say no whenever anyone asks for help, and doors will open up like you will never believe.”

SERVICE RECOGNIZED

Mayank’s efforts to serve his patients and community at large have drawn recognition. In 2020 he received the NARD Ownership Award from the NCPA Foundation. In 2021 he was the New York recipient of the National Alliance of State Pharmacy Associations Excellence in Innovations Award. He was a 2021 finalist in the entrepreneur category for the Next Generation Pharmacist Award. In 2022 Mayank was given the Bowl of Hygieia Award from the Pharmacist Society of State of New York.

“I don’t think I’m deserving of these, but I’m really humbled,” Mayank says modestly, noting that his staff deserves plenty of credit for any success that he and the pharmacy experience.

During the pandemic Super Health Pharmacy locations were converted into full-service COVID testing centers and places where anyone could have their prescriptions or daily essentials delivered for free the same day. The pharmacies also worked with CutRedTape4Heroes.org to donate lifesaving PPE and hand sanitizer to frontline health care workers throughout New York and New Jersey. They donated 100,000 three-ply

surgical masks and 3-ounce hand sanitizers to these frontline workers. A partnership with Catholic Charities gave free rapid COVID tests to Staten Island residents with developmental disabilities living in group homes. When vaccines became available, the pharmacies stepped up, doing thousands of vaccinations in the first months after they became available.

Mayank has also set up an advanced pharmacy practice experience (APPE) site which has allowed pharmacy students of all backgrounds to learn through hands-on experience. He proudly says many of the students have stayed and been promoted within the company, and others have gone on to become leaders in their own respective areas. Mayank’s dedication to his students’ and business’ success allowed for the creation of a learning environment that gives real-life experience in independent neighborhood pharmacy.

CHANGING THE DIALOGUE

Mayank is obviously aware that pharmacists are known as accessible and trustworthy, but he still thinks there’s a bit of a gap in recognizing everything that they bring to the table.

“We have to really change that dialogue,” he says. “Of course, pharmacists have always been responsible, but if we change the narrative a little bit, we can reach out for resources and say hey, we’re ready to take this pledge and be a safe dispenser.”

Education is the key. Mayank says pharmacists are fully ready and able to provide 15-30 minutes educating people on Narcan, on other alternatives to opioid medications, on the safe disposal of medications, on resources about where to go for help, be it for addiction or pain relief.

It’s about establishing a track record of success, Mayank says.

“If we start showing the value there, how much our pharmacists can do – we just have to take that initiative first, to do that work first, so that it is proven and you can demonstrate results, which we now have,” he says. “At that point we can go to our community-based partners – the health department, the district attorney, the mayor, whoever it might be – and tell them to empower us. Give us resources, and resources don’t just mean a manual. It could be monetary, it could be in-services, it could be anything. We can help.”

Mayank remains bullish on community pharmacy.

“We are only scratching the surface of what services pharmacists in an independent community pharmacy setting can provide,” he says. “My father’s words still echo in my ear as we positively impact the different communities we serve: ‘Help others and do the right thing.’” ■

Chris Linville is America’s Pharmacist® managing editor.



Polina Ifraimova, RN, administers a vaccination. At top right, general manager Deep Sheth helped spearhead the pharmacy's COVID-19 response. Below, Mayank Parikh, PharmD, co-founded Super Health Pharmacy in 2016.



Fast Facts: Super Health Pharmacy, Staten Island, N.Y.

Established: 2016. Part of the DMS family of pharmacies, which has several locations.

Management: Mayank Parikh, PharmD, and Parthiv D. Shah, RPh, co-founders. They own two dozen stores, primarily in the New York metropolitan area, along with their partners.

Products and services: Includes standard retail, specialty pharmacy, free delivery, online refills, social determinants of health services, CDC diabetes prevention program, diabetes self-management education and support services (has received accreditation status from the Association of Diabetes Care & Education Specialists), durable medical equipment, medication therapy management, long-term care, immunizations, compounding, flu and strep testing, health screenings, men's health, multi-dose packaging, medication synchronization, remote therapeutic monitoring, and remote patient monitoring.

NCPA member since: 2017