



S E N I O R

PHARMAssist

# Medicine Chest

Spring Newsletter 2023

Education - Prevention - Access



## Expanding Our Services

Senior PharmAssist participants, leaders, and volunteers posing for a photo the day before they met with Vice President Kamala Harris last fall

Thanks to the amazing generosity of so many, we began the New Year by raising our income limits for direct financial assistance. Now, Durham Medicare beneficiaries 60 and older with annual incomes below \$36,450/single or \$49,300/couple are eligible for Senior PharmAssist's help to shrink many of their prescription co-payments at the community pharmacy. This amount equals 250% of the federal poverty level.

One of our participants explained how much this means to them: "This helps me quite a bit. I don't know how I'd be able to get all my medicines without PharmAssist's assistance. It would be a real strain on me with my income. I love the program!"

A major reason we were able to expand our services in January was the early impact of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) on Medicare Part D drug benefits that became law in August 2022. Specifically, Medicare drug plans cannot charge more than \$35/month for covered insulin products.

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# Expanding SPA

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This is terrific news not only for Medicare beneficiaries nationwide, but in Durham, it means that Senior PharmAssist also pays a lot less for insulin! Thus, we lowered our insulin co-payments for our participants to \$5 a month for vials and \$10 a month for pens. This is a major step forward, ensuring access to critical medications.

SPA's Clinical Services Director Marilyn Disco explains: "This change to Medicare's insulin coverage can be a game changer. And, luckily, it helps us cover more types of insulin for our participants. Insulin is a life-saving medication. In the past, before they had our prescription card, some participants had to ration their insulin and skip doses, or lower the dose in order to stretch their supply. Lowering insulin co-payments and ensuring the cost is the same throughout the year is reassuring and brings folks peace of mind."

The Inflation Reduction Act also ensures that, in 2023, shingles vaccines and other vaccines for Medicare beneficiaries are covered without co-payments. This removes tremendous financial barriers to those who struggle financially and had to come up with \$170-200/year for these vaccines. Now, more Medicare beneficiaries are better able to participate in preventive care that supports their own well-being, which helps us all.



**FOX  
FAMILY  
FOUNDATION**

## Partner Highlight

Thank you to our long-time partners, Fox Family Foundation, that recently awarded Senior PharmAssist a \$30,000 challenge grant! Fox Family Foundation supports and engages with partners to make a positive difference in our community through arts and culture, education, health, and human services. Established in 1991, the Foundation's vision is a greater Durham area where people's lives are enriched and improved. The Foundation has supported SPA's mission to serve older adults in Durham since 1996! We are so grateful for decades of friendship.



## Volunteers needed!

Senior PharmAssist is looking for volunteers interested in representing our mission at health fairs and other community events. If you are interested, please email [info@seniorpharmassist.org](mailto:info@seniorpharmassist.org).

## Medicare Basics Webinars

Registration now open for Medicare Basics! In this free seminar, our experts will provide a comprehensive introduction to Medicare and answer your questions. Perfect for anyone new to Medicare or care partners.

Each session is 75 minutes long via Zoom.

**Tuesday, May 23 @ 6:00pm**

**Thursday, June 15 @ 11:00am**

To register, email [knesmith@seniorpharmassist.org](mailto:knesmith@seniorpharmassist.org).



► Senior PharmAssist staff serve popcorn at a Shred-A-Thon fraud prevention event in March.

# Health Education Stars

by Gina Upchurch

In our Spring newsletter, “The Pulse,” we remembered **Dr. Howard Fitts** who died in early 2023. He was influential in the formative days of Senior PharmAssist as we learned more about the community context in Durham. He was the first Chair of the Department of Health Education at NC Central University.

Now, I want to remember another amazing health educator researcher and practitioner who truly made Senior PharmAssist possible – **Dr. Jo Anne Earp**, who died on November 18, 2022. She was my biggest academic cheerleader as my Public Health Master’s Paper advisor turned friend and long-time mentor. JAE (how I referred to her) encouraged me - dare I say drove me – to publish my Master’s Paper, which was a policy analysis of what could be done to help older adults in Durham who were struggling to pay for medicines and deal with problems caused by medications. Pushing the publication gas pedal the summer after graduation in 1993 was in large part due to her insistence! That publication featured in the NC Medical Journal was noticed by leaders at The Duke Endowment, and subsequently, Senior PharmAssist opened its doors in June 1994, with a grant through the Durham County Hospital Corporation.



Dr. Jo Anne Earp

JAE and her husband Shelley have been financial supporters ever since. More importantly, JAE’s engaging me as adjunct faculty, especially with patient advocacy work and as a mentor myself for many student practicums has ensured that Senior PharmAssist’s work is grounded in public health principles. In fact, we used the same four criteria I used for my Master’s Paper – efficiency, equity, user-friendliness, and long-term feasibility – in work we published in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society in February about medication reconciliation in Durham.

JAE would regularly send me comments after reading our newsletter from cover to cover – sharing that she was so proud of the work – helping Durham residents. She also shared that our work via publications made her even prouder as good ideas should not remain in a vacuum.

JAE eventually became the Chair of the Department of Health Education at UNC-Chapel Hill and this position is now named for her. She was a force of nature and her influence touched and molded so many public health students. I was and am one of those lucky ones. You never know who is going to change your life and I am so thankful that Dr. Earp – JAE – changed mine.



## Impact Insight

*“We had a referral from a primary care physician the other day for a medication review. When the new participant had completed his medication therapy review, he said, ‘You are the first person who ever sat down and told me what my medications are for.’”*

*-Marilyn, SPA Pharmacist*






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## Participant Highlight: Meet Iris

Iris joined the program at Senior PharmAssist in 2018 when, she says, she “came to get help with the cost of drugs ‘cause they were getting so expensive.” She has worked her whole life - and in retirement, she works part time for a real estate company and she’s a local artist whose work is showcased in galleries across the Triangle. Even still, a little extra help paying for the expensive medications prescribed by her doctor is welcome. “I don’t know why it has to be so difficult for people to get what they need,” she says. “But Senior PharmAssist saves me a lot. They have so much knowledge and if I have a problem they always help me.”

Iris participates in the medication therapy review with SPA’s pharmacists. Those visits, she says, “help me understand why I’m taking my meds and what they’re for.” With her SPA prescription card, she pays \$2 for medications that might otherwise cost \$50 or more. That helps to keep her healthy, she explains. “There has never been a time I called and asked a question and they haven’t known the answer. They are nice and no one looks down on you. They are really there to help.”

Iris creates beautiful paintings and hand-crafted greeting cards. She has taught art classes at the Durham Center for Senior Life, and she’s an active member of her art guild. Thanks to Iris for sharing her story and her talents!



*Iris with some of her art on display at the NC Crafts Gallery in Carrboro*

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