By HARLEY BROTHERTON, PHARM D

As the baby boomers age and retire, they will require increasing medical and pharmaceutical care. To help with the challenges of aging, geriatric pharmacy is an exciting sub-specialty focusing on the unique needs of the senior population as their bodies change in their response to medications. Geriatric pharmacists are trained to focus on the patient as a whole, which is especially important in this age group that usually comes with long histories of multiple chronic disease states and the many medications being used to treat them. It is important to first and foremost determine safety and overall effectiveness of any therapies being utilized. As we age, our body’s systems begin to decline and become less efficient, specifically our kidneys and livers, which effects how we respond to drugs and can set us up for more significant side effects or interactions. We also become more prone to develop chronic diseases that impact our overall health. If medications are not dosed appropriately given these unique circumstances, individuals are at a higher risk of falling, developing cognitive impairment, or experiencing other unwanted side effects.

Pharmacists have long been involved with the geriatric population in the role of a consultant to Long Term Care Facilities (LTC). The Certified Geriatric Pharmacist credential has been available since the 1990’s and is now a recognized specialty by Medicare/Medicaid and many state boards of pharmacy throughout the US. This credential has embraced the LTC pharmacist role and is now expanding how pharmacists can aid in the treatment of patients in all different kinds of living situations. It is no secret that as we age, we become more resistant to change and the longer we can stay in a familiar environment, the better we live out our days.

The “Beers Criteria” is a nationally recognized list of medications, which are potentially harmful in the elderly population. This is seen as the “standard of care document” when evaluating a patient’s medication regimen. The most frequent problems encountered by the pharmacists are utilizing inappropriate medications (medications which are potentially harmful), therapy duplication, unnecessary medications (drugs used to treat side effects of other drugs), and improper dosing. Many subtle changes to a patient’s medication regimen (taking at a particular time of the day, or in combination with a type of food) can make a major difference on how well the patient tolerates the medication.

The geriatric specialty of medicine sees some of the most complicated cases when you consider the complexities of the disease status coupled with the social dynamics of this population. It also has the least amount of published data to demonstrate effective therapies. This is where the multidisciplinary approach is the most effective in treating the patient. Prescribed medications, as well as non-prescribed (over-the-counter or herbal) can present a high risk to seniors and can also present a high financial burden to them. Therefore, one of the most important aspects of treatment is to ensure right dose, right drug, right directions, right reason, and right price to maximize their therapy.

The Flathead Valley alone is projected to have a 228% increase in people over the age of 65 by the year 2030 according to the Census 2030 project. We all realize the natural beauty of our area, however another major attraction to the baby boomers is the wonderful access to medical care and specialties we have here. North Valley Hospital is leading the way for the Geriatric population. Currently, North Valley Geriatric Specialty Services is comprised of an Interdisciplinary Team of medical practitioners to care for the patient. The team is composed of a geriatrician, a certified geriatric pharmacist, a dietitian, a physical therapist, and a social worker. The team works together to provide an all-encompassing care plan for the patient and their loved ones. Each role brings a unique perspective to the patient’s care plan, while creating a very positive collaboration that is then communicated to the patient’s primary care provider. For more information on North Valley Geriatric Specialty Services go to: www.NVGeriatrics.org.

As we have continued to live longer, we are presented with many more chronic health problems, financial problems, and socio-economic issues. Our role, as geriatric pharmacists in treating seniors is crucial and arguably one of the most important and impactful role in our profession in the years to come.

Harley Brotherton earned his Doctor of Pharmacy (PharmD) from Washington State University. He became board certified in geriatrics (CGP) in 2005. He has practiced in hospital pharmacy, long-term care consulting, ambulatory care in a geriatric setting, and is currently the Director of Pharmacy at North Valley Hospital. He is one of six certified geriatric pharmacists in the state of Montana.