

Dr. Sadeea Abbasi

Gastroenterology

Dr. Sadeea Abbasi is a gastroenterology specialist in Santa Monica, CA affiliated with Cedars-Sinai. Since 2018, she has been treating patients with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) in the southern California region.

She is very familiar with step therapy. “Every advanced therapy prescription I write for IBD requires prior authorization.” But she has seen significant changes since the California step therapy legislation was passed in 2021. She testified before the California Senate Health Committee in favor of the legislation and noted that since its passage, “there are less denials based on failed-first medication recommendations.” Before the bill was passed, patients typically had to fail the insurer-preferred medication, which can impact the efficacy of another medication. She still gets denials for many prescriptions but is more confident in getting an approval post-legislation.



Before the bill was passed, patients typically had to fail the insurer-preferred medication, which can impact the efficacy of another medication.

Her approach is to submit the authorization, including the FDA-approved medication indication. If there is a step-therapy denial, she requests a peer-to-peer review, before sending an appeal, if possible. Often times, discussion with a peer reviewer expedites the approval process because she reminds the insurance that the prescription “is FDA-approved for first line therapy,” which was submitted in the original authorization. If the plan continues to deny based on a fail-first recommendation, an appeal is submitted with citations for step therapy laws.

Dr. Abbasi’s experience gives her the opportunity to interact with physicians from other states. She mentioned that the path doctors navigate for prescription coverage in states without step therapy legislation is rigorous and difficult. Prior to 2021, the process was similar in California which impacted patient care.

She shared the story of her own patient who was 30 years old and living with ulcerative colitis. Dr. Abbasi wanted to start her on a biologic but the insurance company said she had to first start corticosteroids, which are not a long-term therapy, for eight weeks prior to any advanced therapy. The corticosteroids gave the patient a huge body rash and her disease progressed, to the point where the patient had to be admitted to the hospital and started on treatment as an inpatient. Dr. Abbasi added that experience has shown “if a patient with aggressive disease is delayed in starting advanced treatments like biologic therapies, their disease can progress and they may not respond to medical management, instead requiring surgery,” which made the situation a “dangerous precedent” before the California law was passed.

Her biggest concern with the California step therapy law is how many health professionals are unaware of it. She is hopeful that patient organizations and the medical community will continue their advocacy to educate providers. And she will continue to use her voice to educate her colleagues across the nation.