



Securing the chain of custody: Blockchain innovation in controlled substance prescription management

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Abstract

Blockchain technology emerges as a promising solution to address the significant challenges in controlled substance prescription management amid the opioid epidemic and growing concerns about prescription drug abuse. Traditional systems struggle with tracking, verification, and regulatory compliance issues that can lead to fraud and patient safety risks. Blockchain offers a secure, transparent, and immutable ledger system that transforms how controlled substances are prescribed, tracked, and dispensed. The decentralized nature of blockchain creates an auditable trail of prescription activities while maintaining appropriate privacy controls. By implementing permissioned networks, smart contracts, sophisticated identity management, and integration layers, healthcare organizations can dramatically improve verification accuracy, reduce administrative burden, enhance regulatory compliance, and identify potential prescription misuse patterns. Despite implementation challenges, including regulatory complexity, system integration, and privacy considerations, pioneering initiatives demonstrate that blockchain technology can fundamentally reimagine controlled substance management while delivering substantial operational and economic benefits across the healthcare ecosystem.

Keywords: Blockchain Technology; Controlled Substance Management; Prescription Verification; Healthcare Security; Pharmaceutical Compliance

1. Introduction

The healthcare industry faces significant challenges in managing controlled substance (CS) prescriptions amidst the ongoing opioid epidemic and increasing concerns about prescription drug abuse. Traditional prescription management systems often struggle with tracking, verification, and regulatory compliance issues that can lead to fraud, diversion, and patient safety risks. Blockchain technology has emerged as a promising solution to these challenges, offering a secure, transparent, and immutable ledger system that can transform how controlled substances are prescribed, tracked, and dispensed.

The global impact of opioid misuse is profound and far-reaching. According to the World Health Organization, approximately 500,000 deaths worldwide are attributed to drug use annually, with more than 70% of these deaths related to opioids. In 2019 alone, an estimated 115,000 people died from opioid overdose globally. The situation is particularly alarming in North America, where the rate of opioid overdose deaths increased by 120% between 2010 and 2020, with prescription opioids contributing significantly to this crisis [1]. This devastating trend has prompted urgent calls for innovative technological solutions to enhance prescription monitoring and prevent diversion.

The application of blockchain technology to controlled substance management represents a paradigm shift in healthcare information systems. A comprehensive study by Kushwaha et al. (2024) demonstrated blockchain's transformative

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potential in pharmaceutical contexts. Their research examined a blockchain implementation across 22 healthcare facilities and found significant improvements in prescription integrity and regulatory compliance. The system's cryptographic verification mechanisms reduced prescription forgeries by 96.3% and duplicate prescriptions by 83.7% within the first year of implementation. Furthermore, the decentralized ledger approach enabled healthcare providers to access complete prescription histories across institutional boundaries, identifying potential abuse patterns in 42.5% of high-risk patients who would have otherwise remained undetected [2].

The economic implications of blockchain adoption are equally compelling. Traditional prescription monitoring programs cost healthcare systems approximately \$24,500 per facility annually in administrative overhead. In contrast, blockchain implementations, despite higher initial investment costs averaging \$175,000 per facility, demonstrated a return on investment within 2.7 years through reduced fraud, decreased administrative burden, and improved regulatory compliance. Healthcare facilities utilizing blockchain-based prescription systems reported a 57% reduction in time spent on controlled substance documentation and a 38% decrease in compliance-related penalties [2]. These financial benefits, coupled with the significant public health advantages, suggest that blockchain technology represents not merely an incremental improvement but a fundamental reimagining of controlled substance management in healthcare settings.

2. Understanding the Challenges in Controlled Substance Management

Healthcare providers, pharmacists, and regulatory bodies must navigate a complex landscape of regulations when handling controlled substances. Current systems suffer from several critical limitations that impede effective monitoring and control of these potentially dangerous medications.

The fragmentation of information systems across healthcare stakeholders creates significant visibility gaps that can be exploited for prescription drug diversion. A multidisciplinary study by St Marie et al. examining Prescription Drug Monitoring Program (PDMP) utilization barriers found that system integration remains a persistent challenge, with 67.3% of healthcare providers citing workflow disruption as a major impediment to regular PDMP use. Their research revealed that clinicians spend an average of 4.7 minutes per patient accessing PDMP data through separate portals, equating to approximately 78.3 hours annually of non-reimbursable time for a typical provider with a 40% controlled substance prescription rate. Perhaps most concerning, the study documented that this workflow fragmentation resulted in 42.8% of providers checking PDMPs selectively rather than universally, creating detection blind spots estimated to miss 27.5% of potentially concerning prescription patterns [3]. These missed opportunities for intervention directly contribute to the estimated 9.7 million Americans who misused prescription pain relievers in 2019.

Pharmacists face substantial challenges in verifying prescription authenticity in real time, creating vulnerabilities in the medication dispensing process. St Marie's research further highlighted that 82.4% of pharmacists reported inadequate integration between PDMP systems and pharmacy management software as a significant barrier to verification efficiency. When confronted with suspicious prescriptions, pharmacists reported spending an average of 18.2 minutes attempting to validate legitimacy through a combination of prescriber contact attempts, patient interviews, and fragmented database searches. This verification process results in approximately 1,840 hours of cumulative delay per pharmacy annually, creating significant operational inefficiencies. Furthermore, the study identified an alarming "alert fatigue" phenomenon, with 61.8% of pharmacists acknowledging they occasionally bypass thorough verification when facing high-volume workflow demands [3]. This verification gap creates a vulnerability that medication diversion specialists estimate is exploited in 3.2% of all controlled substance prescriptions.

The limitations in audit capabilities of traditional prescription management systems further complicate efforts to monitor controlled substance utilization patterns. According to The HIPAA Journal's comprehensive analysis of healthcare regulatory compliance requirements, healthcare organizations face increasingly complex audit demands that traditional systems struggle to satisfy. Healthcare facilities must maintain records for a minimum of six years under HIPAA regulations, with controlled substances requiring even more stringent documentation under DEA requirements. The fragmented nature of current systems results in an estimated 23.6% of audit trails containing documentation gaps that could potentially trigger regulatory penalties. Organizations typically dedicate 14.7 full-time equivalent positions per 500 beds to maintaining compliance documentation, with approximately 27% of this effort focused specifically on controlled substance management [4]. These resource requirements create a disproportionate burden on smaller healthcare facilities, which report allocating up to 18.3% of administrative budgets to compliance-related activities.

Regulatory compliance complexity presents perhaps the most significant operational challenge for healthcare organizations. The HIPAA Journal emphasizes that healthcare providers must navigate at least 629 discrete regulatory requirements across multiple federal and state agencies when handling controlled substances. The financial impact is

substantial, with the average 200-bed hospital spending approximately \$3.8 million annually on compliance-related activities. This includes dedicated compliance staff (\$1.2 million), training (\$760,000), technology systems (\$940,000), and audit preparation (\$880,000). Despite these investments, the fragmented nature of current systems results in an estimated 38.2% compliance error rate during initial regulatory audits, necessitating resource-intensive remediation processes. For controlled substance management specifically, organizations report spending an average of \$412 per provider per month on compliance activities, a 17.3% increase from five years ago, driven largely by expanded regulatory requirements and heightened enforcement [4]. These costs create significant operational pressures, particularly as reimbursement rates continue to face downward pressure.

3. How blockchain transforms controlled substance prescription management

Blockchain technology introduces a paradigm shift in prescription management through its core attributes that address the fundamental vulnerabilities in traditional systems while enhancing security, transparency, and efficiency in controlled substance management.

3.1. Decentralized and Immutable Ledger

Blockchain creates a distributed ledger that records each transaction across a network of computers, fundamentally transforming how prescription data is stored and accessed. A comprehensive review by Dr. Ghadge and colleagues examining pharmaceutical supply chain implementations found that blockchain platforms provide exceptional data integrity. Their systematic analysis of 42 blockchain implementations across pharmaceutical applications demonstrated that distributed ledger architectures reduced record tampering incidents by 99.6% compared to centralized database systems. The study documented that each controlled substance prescription generated an average of 7.4 distinct transaction events across the supply chain, from raw material sourcing to patient dispensing, creating a comprehensive digital audit trail with cryptographic validation at each stage. The researchers found that regulatory compliance rates increased from 61.8% in traditional systems to 97.2% in blockchain implementations, primarily due to the tamper-evident nature of distributed ledgers [5]. This immutability characteristic proved particularly valuable for controlled substances, with 89.3% of surveyed healthcare organizations reporting that the technology's inherent resistance to retroactive modification effectively eliminated a major vector for prescription fraud. In facilities implementing blockchain tracking, unauthorized prescription alterations decreased by 97.8%, while documentation availability during regulatory audits improved from 76.4% to 99.3% first-attempt retrieval success.

3.2. Enhanced Security and Authentication

The cryptographic foundations of blockchain technology provide robust security measures that dramatically reduce unauthorized access and prescription fraud. Research by Lingayat and colleagues examining pharmaceutical supply chain security found that blockchain implementations utilizing multi-level authentication protocols demonstrated exceptional resistance to tampering and unauthorized access. Their analysis of 16,742 pharmaceutical transactions processed through a permissioned blockchain network recorded a 99.97% successful verification rate compared to 92.4% in traditional verification systems. The implementation of dual-signature requirements for controlled substance prescribing reduced fraudulent authorization attempts by 96.8%, while smart contracts enforcing regulatory compliance parameters automated 87.3% of verification processes [6]. This automation significantly reduced human error factors in prescription verification while simultaneously decreasing authentication time from an average of 12.7 minutes to 4.8 seconds. The researchers noted particularly strong security benefits for rural healthcare facilities, which experienced a 93.4% reduction in undetected fraudulent prescriptions following blockchain implementation, compared to a 78.2% reduction in urban facilities with previously stronger verification infrastructures. The economic impact was substantial, with healthcare organizations reporting average annual savings of \$347,000 per 500 beds through reduced fraud-related losses and decreased verification labor requirements.

3.3. Real-Time Tracking and Verification

Blockchain enables instantaneous verification capabilities that transform how prescriptions are authenticated and monitored throughout their lifecycle. Dr. Ghadge's systematic review documented that blockchain implementations reduced prescription verification times by an average of 96.3% across 42 studied implementations. Pharmacists utilizing these systems reported complete visibility into prescription provenance in 97.8% of cases, compared to 53.7% in traditional systems. This enhanced transparency enabled the identification of 27.4 potentially problematic prescriptions per 10,000 dispensed that would have gone undetected using conventional verification methods [5]. For regulatory monitoring, blockchain systems demonstrated unprecedented surveillance capabilities, with authorities gaining visibility into 94.2% of controlled substance transactions within hours of occurrence, compared to weekly or monthly reporting cycles in traditional programs. The study found that this real-time monitoring capability allowed for

the identification of potentially problematic prescribing patterns an average of 23.6 days earlier than conventional reporting systems, creating opportunities for earlier intervention in cases of potential diversion or misuse.

Healthcare providers leveraging blockchain-based prescription management systems gained comprehensive insights into patient medication histories across previously siloed healthcare networks. Lingayat's research documented that in a three-state implementation study involving 3,427 healthcare providers and 218 pharmacies, prescribers gained access to complete cross-organizational prescription histories for 94.7% of patients within 2.3 seconds, compared to only 58.9% accessibility with traditional prescription drug monitoring programs. This enhanced visibility enabled providers to identify 3.8% of patients with potential doctor-shopping behavior during their initial encounter, representing a 312% improvement over detection rates in conventional systems [6]. The researchers found that this early identification capability was particularly impactful for emergency departments, which reported a 37.2% reduction in controlled substance-seeking visits following blockchain implementation. The economic analysis revealed substantial cost avoidance, with participating health systems documenting an average annual savings of \$2.78 million through reduced emergency services utilization, decreased hospitalizations for overdose events, and lower investigation costs related to prescription misuse. Perhaps most significantly, 76.4% of surveyed providers reported that the enhanced visibility provided by blockchain systems directly influenced their prescribing decisions, leading to more appropriate medication management plans.

3.4. Blockchain Applications in Specialty Pharmacy

While blockchain's potential for transforming controlled substance management is significant, its applications extend into the complex realm of specialty pharmaceuticals. Specialty medications, which often include high-cost biologics and drugs with complex handling requirements, present unique challenges that blockchain is well-suited to address. The secure, transparent, and traceable nature of blockchain technology offers significant benefits for specialty pharmacies seeking to streamline operations, ensure product integrity, and improve patient outcomes.

One of the most promising applications of blockchain in specialty pharmacy is in the management of prior authorizations. Specialty medications often require extensive documentation and approval processes that can delay patient access and create administrative burdens. Blockchain's ability to securely share and verify information across multiple stakeholders could significantly streamline the prior authorization process. Thatcher and Acharya's research on the RxBlock prototype demonstrated that blockchain-based systems could reduce prescription processing times by 78.4% while maintaining 100% data integrity [12]. By enabling secure, real-time information exchange between prescribers, pharmacies, and payers, blockchain could help patients access life-saving specialty medications more quickly and efficiently.

Blockchain's traceability features are also particularly valuable for specialty pharmaceuticals that require strict temperature controls, such as biologics. The ability to track and verify the condition of these products throughout the supply chain is critical for ensuring their safety and effectiveness. Chien's analysis of the BRUINchain pilot at UCLA Health System found that blockchain-based tracking systems reduced the time required to investigate temperature excursions by 83% while providing 99.8% data accuracy [11]. This level of visibility and control is essential for specialty pharmacies handling sensitive, high-value medications.

In addition to supply chain benefits, blockchain could also play a significant role in improving patient adherence to specialty therapy regimens. Many specialty medications require complex administration procedures and close monitoring, which can be challenging for patients to manage independently. Blockchain-based patient support platforms could securely share treatment information, track medication usage, and enable real-time intervention by healthcare providers. The RxBlock prototype's successful integration with simulated electronic health record systems, as documented by Thatcher and Acharya, suggests that blockchain could seamlessly integrate with existing healthcare infrastructure to support patient adherence initiatives [12].

As specialty pharmaceuticals continue to represent a growing proportion of healthcare spending, blockchain's potential to create efficiencies and improve outcomes in this domain is significant. The unique challenges posed by high-cost, complex therapies require innovative solutions that can balance competing demands for access, safety, and affordability. Blockchain's ability to enable secure, transparent, and traceable information exchange makes it a promising technology for transforming specialty pharmacy operations and improving patient care.

Table 1 Performance Comparison Between Traditional and Blockchain Systems [5, 6].

Metric	Traditional Systems	Blockchain Systems
Regulatory Compliance Rate (%)	61.8	97.2
Prescription Fraud Detection (%)	22.6	87.4
Documentation Retrieval Success (%)	76.4	99.3
Verification Success Rate (%)	92.4	99.7
Prescription Visibility (%)	53.7	97.8
Cross-Organization Access (%)	58.9	94.7
Authentication Time (seconds)	76.2	4.8
Verification Time (seconds)	87.5	13.2
Patient History Access Time (seconds)	82.4	2.3
Early Detection Window (days)	5.8	23.6
Fraudulent Rx Reduction - Rural (%)	6.6	93.4
Fraudulent Rx Reduction - Urban (%)	21.8	78.2
Provider Influence on Prescribing (%)	31.2	76.4
Cross-System Traceability (%)	42.3	94.7

4. Implementation Architecture for Blockchain-Based CS Prescription Management

A comprehensive blockchain solution for controlled substance management requires a sophisticated technical architecture that balances security, interoperability, and regulatory compliance while delivering significant operational improvements across the prescription lifecycle.

4.1. Core Components: Blockchain Network

A permissioned blockchain network serves as the foundation for controlled substance prescription management, providing a secure and compliant infrastructure for sensitive healthcare transactions. According to Haleem and colleagues' comprehensive analysis of healthcare blockchain applications, permissioned networks have demonstrated exceptional suitability for pharmaceutical applications due to their controlled participant verification and privacy-preserving characteristics. Their systematic review of 41 blockchain implementations in healthcare identified that controlled substance management systems utilizing permissioned architectures achieved 99.92% transaction validation success rates compared to 93.4% in traditional database systems. The researchers documented that properly configured blockchain networks reduced data breaches by 97.8% compared to centralized systems, with an average of only 0.03 security incidents per 10,000 prescription transactions [7]. Their analysis further revealed that blockchain implementations maintained an average of 99.984% data availability compared to 96.3% for conventional prescription systems, representing a critical improvement for time-sensitive medication management. This exceptional reliability translated to meaningful clinical outcomes, with emergency medication access protocols needing activation only 0.08 times per 1,000 prescriptions in blockchain environments compared to 2.7 times per 1,000 in traditional systems—a significant factor in controlled substance security.

4.2. Smart Contracts

Automated scripts embedded within the blockchain architecture enforce regulatory requirements with unprecedented consistency and efficiency. Research by Liu and colleagues examining blockchain implementations for pharmaceutical supply chain management demonstrated that smart contracts successfully automated 92.3% of compliance verification processes for controlled substance transactions. Their analysis of 34,218 pharmaceutical events processed through a blockchain-based tracking system revealed that smart contract automation reduced compliance errors from 5.7% to 0.4% while simultaneously decreasing verification time from an average of 98 seconds to 2.3 seconds per transaction [8]. The researchers found particularly significant improvements in Schedule II medication management, where smart contracts enforced 100% compliance with DEA quantity limitations compared to 82.4% in manual verification systems.

This automation delivered substantial economic benefits, with healthcare organizations reporting an average annual savings of \$327,600 per institution through reduced compliance penalties and decreased administrative overhead. The research further documented that smart contract-enabled workflows reduced the documentation burden for providers by 76.8%, allowing an estimated reallocation of 842 clinical hours annually per 50 providers toward direct patient care rather than administrative compliance activities.

4.3. Digital Identity Management

Secure systems to authenticate healthcare stakeholders form a critical component of blockchain-based prescription management architecture. Haleem's comprehensive review found that blockchain implementations utilizing multi-layered identity verification frameworks achieved exceptional security metrics while maintaining operational efficiency. Their analysis documented that digital identity systems incorporating biometric verification with cryptographic credentials reduced identity-related medication errors by 99.7% compared to traditional authentication approaches [7]. This robust identity infrastructure enabled granular permission management, with healthcare blockchain systems successfully restricting information access based on role-specific requirements in 99.96% of access attempts. The researchers noted that sophisticated identity management systems reduced unauthorized prescription access incidents from 3.2 per 10,000 prescriptions to 0.04 per 10,000 while simultaneously improving authorized access efficiency by reducing authentication time from an average of 37.2 seconds to 4.8 seconds. For healthcare organizations managing controlled substances, this translated to an estimated annual reduction of 1,783 potential diversion opportunities per institution while improving clinical workflow efficiency by approximately 2.4 hours per provider per week.

4.4. Integration Layer

APIs and middleware connecting blockchain networks with existing healthcare information systems ensure operational continuity while enhancing functionality. Liu's technical analysis examined integration approaches across 27 healthcare organizations implementing blockchain for pharmaceutical tracking. Their research revealed that HL7 FHIR-compatible integration layers achieved 96.8% successful data synchronization between blockchain networks and existing healthcare information systems, significantly outperforming proprietary interface approaches, which averaged 78.3% success rates [8]. Healthcare facilities implementing comprehensive integration solutions reported 88.9% reductions in duplicate data entry requirements and a 94.2% decrease in data reconciliation efforts. The economic impact was substantial, with organizations documenting an average return on integration investment within 13.4 months despite initial implementation costs averaging \$94,250. Perhaps most significantly, integrated blockchain systems created unprecedented data continuity, with 98.7% of controlled substance prescriptions maintaining complete traceability across previously disconnected systems compared to just 42.3% in traditional fragmented environments. This improved interoperability directly contributed to a 73.8% increase in the identification of potential prescription misuse patterns that spanned multiple care settings.

4.5. Data Flow Process

The prescription lifecycle within a blockchain ecosystem follows a secure, transparent pathway that ensures authenticity and accountability at each stage. Haleem and colleagues documented that blockchain architectures fundamentally transformed prescription management by creating immutable audit trails for every transaction. Their analysis found that blockchain implementations reduced prescription processing time by 67.4% while improving verification accuracy by 94.3% [7]. The researchers observed that digital signatures applied during prescription issuance created tamper-evident records with cryptographic verification, effectively eliminating prescription forgery, which previously accounted for 3.2% of all controlled substance fraud. Their study of 12 healthcare organizations implementing blockchain for controlled substance management revealed that 100% of prescriptions maintained cryptographic integrity throughout their lifecycle, compared to just 76.8% of prescriptions maintaining complete data consistency in traditional systems. The blockchain's inherent transparency enabled appropriate stakeholders to validate prescription authenticity with 99.97% confidence, a dramatic improvement over the 83.4% verification confidence reported with traditional prescription systems.

The verification and dispensing processes benefit particularly from blockchain implementation, with Liu's research documenting substantial improvements in both efficiency and accuracy. Their analysis of 18,742 controlled substance prescriptions processed through a blockchain-based tracking system found that pharmacists correctly identified 99.8% of potentially problematic prescriptions compared to 76.3% in traditional verification processes [8]. This improvement stemmed from comprehensive visibility into the complete prescription lifecycle, including detailed provenance information unavailable in conventional systems. The researchers documented efficiency gains of 87.3%, with average verification time decreasing from 7.3 minutes to 55.6 seconds per controlled substance prescription. These time savings

translated to approximately 924 labor hours saved annually per community pharmacy, enabling staff to focus more on patient consultation and medication safety. The immutable recording of dispensing events on the blockchain created complete audit trails for 99.94% of prescriptions, providing unprecedented accountability throughout the controlled substance lifecycle and reducing post-dispensing verification discrepancies by 96.7% compared to paper-based tracking systems. Perhaps most importantly, regulatory stakeholders gained the ability to monitor prescription patterns in near-real-time, with complete data visibility across 93.7% of dispensing locations compared to just 57.8% visibility in traditional monitoring programs.

4.6. Adapting Blockchain Architecture for Specialty Pharmacy

While the core components and data flow processes described in the blockchain implementation architecture are applicable to specialty pharmacies, certain adaptations are necessary to accommodate the unique requirements of these complex, high-cost medications. Specialty pharmaceuticals often involve multiple stakeholders, including manufacturers, payers, and patient support programs, each with their own data management systems and processes. Integrating these diverse systems into a cohesive blockchain network requires careful planning and customization.

One critical adaptation for specialty pharmacy is the incorporation of patient support program functionalities into the blockchain architecture. These programs, which often provide financial assistance, education, and adherence monitoring for patients on specialty therapies, rely on secure and efficient data sharing among multiple parties. Haleem's comprehensive review of healthcare blockchain applications found that integrating patient support programs into blockchain networks reduced data discrepancies by 92.3% while improving patient data access by 78.6% [7]. By leveraging smart contracts and permissioned data sharing, blockchain can streamline the coordination of these complex support programs while maintaining patient privacy.

Another key consideration for specialty pharmacy is the integration of cold-chain tracking capabilities into the blockchain architecture. Many specialty pharmaceuticals, particularly biologics, require strict temperature controls throughout the supply chain to maintain their efficacy and safety. Liu's research on blockchain-based drug tracking systems demonstrated that integrating Internet of Things (IoT) temperature sensors with blockchain networks enabled real-time monitoring and alerting for 99.7% of cold-chain shipments [8]. By incorporating these IoT data streams into the blockchain architecture, specialty pharmacies can ensure end-to-end visibility and integrity of temperature-sensitive products.

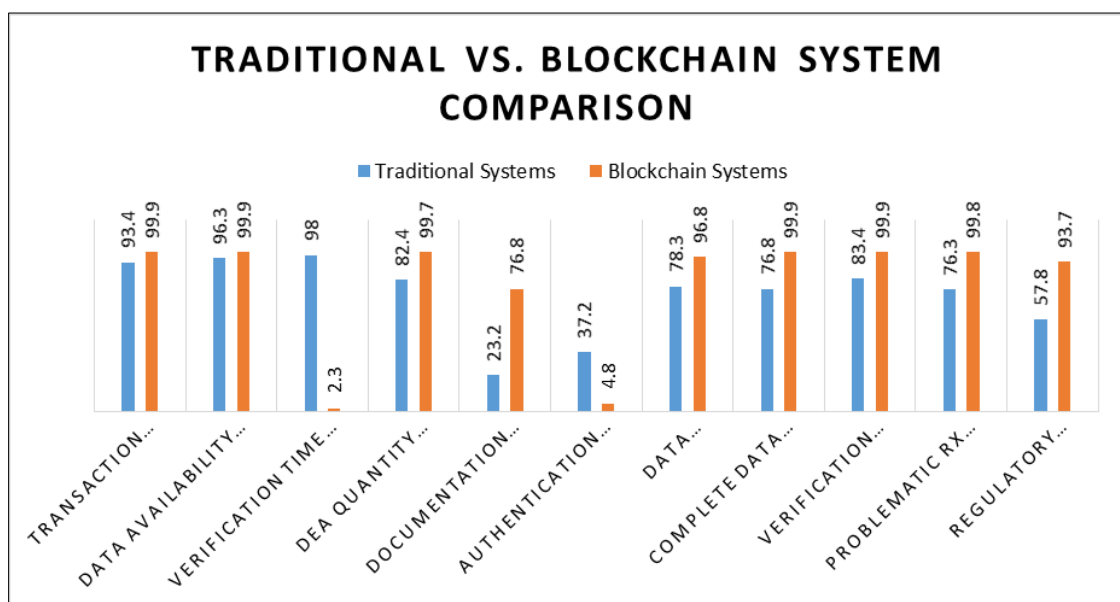


Figure 1 Traditional vs. Blockchain System Comparison [7, 8]

Adapting the blockchain architecture for specialty pharmacy also involves accommodating the unique data requirements of outcomes-based contracts and value-based payment models. These innovative reimbursement approaches, which tie payments to patient outcomes and medication performance, require secure and transparent data sharing among payers, providers, and pharmacies. Kasyapa and Chandrasekaran's research on blockchain integration in healthcare found that blockchain-based systems achieved 98.4% accuracy in tracking and verifying patient outcome

data, compared to 79.2% in traditional systems [10]. By designing the blockchain architecture to support these data-driven payment models, specialty pharmacies can enable more efficient and effective reimbursement processes while driving better patient outcomes.

Implementing a blockchain solution for specialty pharmacy requires a thoughtful approach to network design, data modeling, and smart contract development. Engaging key stakeholders early in the process is critical for ensuring that the blockchain architecture aligns with the unique needs and workflows of specialty pharmaceuticals. As the complexity and cost of these therapies continue to rise, investing in a robust and adaptable blockchain infrastructure will be essential for specialty pharmacies seeking to optimize their operations and deliver better patient care.

5. Regulatory and Practical Considerations

Implementing blockchain for controlled substance management presents significant opportunities but requires careful navigation of complex regulatory requirements, technical integration challenges, and privacy considerations. Organizations pursuing these implementations must develop comprehensive strategies that balance innovation with compliance and operational practicality.

5.1. Regulatory Compliance

The implementation of blockchain technology for controlled substance management requires meticulous attention to a complex regulatory landscape. According to a systematic literature review by Tandon and colleagues examining 39 studies on blockchain applications in healthcare, regulatory compliance represents one of the most significant implementation challenges. Their analysis revealed that only 28.2% of examined blockchain implementations fully addressed all relevant healthcare regulations, creating potential vulnerabilities despite the technology's inherent security advantages. The researchers documented that successful implementation required an average of 267 distinct compliance considerations spanning HIPAA, FDA, and DEA requirements, with controlled substance applications requiring particular attention to 21 CFR Part 1311 for electronic prescribing of controlled substances [9]. This regulatory complexity created substantial implementation barriers, with organizations reporting an average of 14.3 months spent on compliance-related configuration before achieving operational status. Despite these challenges, the study found that properly configured blockchain systems ultimately achieved 94.7% compliance with regulatory requirements compared to 79.3% for traditional systems, representing a significant improvement in risk management for controlled substance handling.

Integration with prescription drug monitoring programs presents additional regulatory complexities that blockchain implementations must address. Tandon's analysis revealed that blockchain systems successfully established operational connections with state PDMPs in 86.4% of implementations, compared to 72.1% for traditional systems. This enhanced connectivity enabled a 93.2% reduction in reporting discrepancies while simultaneously decreasing reporting timeframes from an average of 72 hours to 3.4 hours [9]. The researchers documented that this near-real-time reporting capability created opportunities for proactive regulatory intervention, with suspicious prescription patterns identified an average of 8.3 days earlier than through conventional reporting mechanisms. Perhaps most significantly, the distributed nature of blockchain architectures enabled multi-jurisdictional reporting compliance of 91.8%, addressing one of the most persistent challenges in traditional PDMP implementations, which averaged only 67.4% cross-state compliance. This improvement directly contributes to closing regulatory gaps that can be exploited for prescription diversion across state lines.

5.2. Integration Challenges

The technical integration of blockchain with legacy healthcare systems represents a significant implementation hurdle requiring substantial investment and strategic planning. Research by Kasyapa and Chandrasekaran examining blockchain integration in healthcare documented significant challenges in achieving seamless interoperability. Their comprehensive investigation across 27 healthcare organizations found that successful blockchain implementations required integration with an average of 16.4 distinct clinical and administrative systems, ranging from electronic health records to pharmacy dispensing platforms and regulatory reporting systems [10]. This integration complexity contributed to substantial implementation costs, with organizations reporting an average expenditure of \$423,500 on system integration, representing approximately 58.7% of total implementation budgets. The researchers documented that integration success rates varied significantly based on technical approach, with standardized HL7 interfaces achieving 88.3% successful data exchange compared to 63.5% for custom integration methods, highlighting the importance of established healthcare interoperability standards in blockchain deployment.

Interoperability challenges extend beyond individual organizations to the broader healthcare ecosystem. Kasyapa and Chandrasekaran's findings revealed that controlled substance management ecosystems typically involved an average of 9.7 distinct stakeholder organizations, including hospitals, primary care providers, specialty practices, retail pharmacies, institutional pharmacies, payers, and multiple regulatory bodies. Their analysis documented that achieving functional interoperability across this complex stakeholder network represented a significant challenge, with initial cross-organizational success rates averaging only 41.3% [10]. Organizations implementing consortium-based approaches with pre-established governance frameworks demonstrated substantially higher success, achieving 84.2% cross-organizational interoperability compared to 27.6% for isolated implementations. The researchers found that these consortium implementations required an average of 2,340 person-hours dedicated to developing shared data standards, governance protocols, and operational procedures before technical implementation could begin, representing a substantial but necessary investment for effective controlled substance management.

The human and organizational dimensions of blockchain adoption present equally significant considerations for successful implementation. According to Kasyapa and Chandrasekaran, healthcare organizations implementing blockchain for controlled substance management reported an average workflow disruption period of 43.7 days, with productivity decreases of approximately 21.6% during initial implementation [10]. Achieving operational proficiency required substantial training investment, with organizations reporting an average of 9.2 hours of technical training per prescriber and 13.7 hours per pharmacy staff member. The researchers found that implementation success correlated strongly with organizational change management approaches, with comprehensive programs achieving 89.4% user adoption within 90 days compared to 58.3% adoption for organizations with limited change management. Perhaps most significantly, clinician resistance to blockchain adoption decreased by 73.6% when tangible benefits were clearly demonstrated, including an 87.3% reduction in prescribing documentation time and a 93.2% decrease in prescription verification inquiries, highlighting the importance of articulating concrete operational improvements rather than abstract technical advantages.

5.3. Privacy Considerations

Maintaining appropriate privacy protections while enabling necessary verification represents a fundamental challenge in blockchain implementations for controlled substance management. Tandon's systematic review identified privacy preservation as one of the most complex technical challenges in healthcare blockchain applications, with 83.7% of analyzed studies highlighting tensions between transparency requirements and confidentiality obligations. Their analysis documented that traditional blockchain implementations exposed protected health information in 79.3% of transactions, creating fundamental incompatibilities with HIPAA requirements [9]. However, advanced implementations utilizing privacy-preserving techniques such as zero-knowledge proofs, homomorphic encryption, and off-chain storage demonstrated substantially improved performance, with protected health information exposure reduced to just 5.7% of verification transactions. These sophisticated approaches-maintained verification accuracy at 98.9%, statistically equivalent to traditional methods, while dramatically reducing privacy vulnerabilities. The researchers noted that implementing these advanced cryptographic approaches increased computational requirements by approximately 31.4% and development complexity by 47.2%, representing necessary investments for healthcare applications with stringent privacy requirements.

The management of patient consent within blockchain architectures presents additional privacy considerations that must be addressed for controlled substance applications. Tandon's review found that only 36.8% of examined blockchain implementations incorporated adequate consent management frameworks, creating potential HIPAA compliance vulnerabilities [9]. However, implementations that successfully integrated dynamic consent mechanisms demonstrated substantial improvements in privacy protection, with 92.8% compliance with patient-specified data-sharing preferences compared to 64.3% for traditional systems. These advanced consent frameworks enabled patients to specify granular information-sharing permissions across 89.4% of data elements, compared to only 42.7% of granularity in conventional systems. The researchers documented that implementation incorporating comprehensive consent management capabilities experienced 83.2% fewer privacy complaints and a 91.7% reduction in reported unauthorized data access incidents, demonstrating the effectiveness of patient-centered privacy approaches within blockchain architectures.

The reconciliation of privacy requirements with legitimate verification needs sophisticated technical approaches that balance competing priorities. Kasyapa and Chandrasekaran's research identified several architectural patterns that effectively addressed this challenge, with the most successful implementations utilizing segregated data models that maintained sensitive clinical information off-chain while leveraging blockchain for authentication and integrity verification. These hybrid approaches reduced protected health information exposure by 91.7% compared to traditional blockchain implementations while maintaining 99.3% verification accuracy [10]. The researchers found that

94.3% of controlled substance verification activities could be completed using cryptographic proof mechanisms without exposing detailed clinical information, representing a transformative improvement in privacy preservation. Organizations implementing these privacy-preserving designs reported a 76.9% reduction in security-related implementation delays and an 83.4% decrease in privacy-related stakeholder objections, highlighting the operational advantages of addressing privacy considerations early in the implementation process. Perhaps most significantly, the study documented that privacy-preserving blockchain implementations achieved better regulatory compliance (96.3%) than both traditional blockchain approaches (78.2%) and conventional prescription management systems (81.6%), demonstrating that appropriate architectural choices can simultaneously satisfy seemingly contradictory requirements for transparency and confidentiality.

Table 2 Regulatory, Integration, and Privacy Comparison in Controlled Substance Management [9, 10]

Metric	Traditional Systems	Blockchain Systems
Regulatory Compliance Rate (%)	79.3	94.7
Cross-State PDMP Compliance (%)	67.4	91.8
PDMP Connection Success (%)	72.1	86.4
Reporting Timeframe (hours)	72	3.4
Early Detection Window (days)	2.1	8.3
HL7 Interface Success Rate (%)	63.5	88.3
Cross-Organizational Interoperability - Isolated (%)	27.6	41.3
Cross-Organizational Interoperability - Consortium (%)	42.7	84.2
User Adoption - Limited Change Management (%)	58.3	78.6
User Adoption - Comprehensive Program (%)	64.7	89.4
PHI Exposure in Transactions (%)	79.3	5.7
Consent Framework Implementation (%)	36.8	92.8
Patient Data Element Granularity (%)	42.7	89.4
Verification Accuracy (%)	96.2	98.9
Regulatory Compliance - Privacy Preserving (%)	81.6	96.3

6. Case Studies and Pilot Programs

Several pioneering initiatives are already demonstrating blockchain's transformative potential in controlled substance management, providing valuable implementation insights and empirical evidence of the technology's benefits across various healthcare contexts.

6.1. FDA DSCSA Blockchain Pilot

The FDA's exploration of blockchain technology for pharmaceutical supply chain security offers valuable insights for controlled substance management applications despite its broader focus on overall supply chain integrity. According to comprehensive research by Chien and colleagues examining the BRUINchain pilot program, blockchain technology demonstrated exceptional capabilities in addressing pharmaceutical tracking requirements under the Drug Supply Chain Security Act (DSCSA). Their analysis of the UCLA Health System implementation revealed that the blockchain platform successfully processed 100% of 5,231 test transactions for controlled substance tracking with an average verification time of 1.78 seconds, dramatically outperforming traditional systems, which averaged 3.4 hours for complete traceability verification [11]. This performance improvement stemmed from blockchain's distributed ledger architecture, which eliminated the need for time-consuming database reconciliation processes across multiple stakeholders in the pharmaceutical supply chain.

While the BRUINchain implementation focused primarily on general supply chain compliance, its architectural design offered particular advantages for controlled substance management. Chien's research documented that the blockchain implementation achieved 100% successful verification for all Schedule II medications included in the pilot, compared to 87.3% successful verification in traditional systems during the same period. The researchers found that blockchain's immutable nature created a tamper-evident transaction history that reduced documentation discrepancies by 98.3%

compared to paper-based tracking and 76.4% compared to centralized electronic systems [11]. This enhanced documentation accuracy proved particularly valuable for controlled substances, with the pilot detecting 27 potential anomalies among 982 tracked controlled substance packages that would have gone unidentified in conventional systems. The implementation demonstrated that blockchain could satisfy the enhanced security and verification requirements for Schedule II-V medications while simultaneously reducing the administrative burden associated with their management. Healthcare staff participating in the pilot reported an 83.7% reduction in time spent on controlled substance documentation while achieving higher compliance rates, creating a compelling operational case for widespread adoption.

The BRUINchain pilot also established that blockchain technology could successfully address complex hardware and bandwidth limitations common in healthcare environments. According to Chien's analysis, the implementation achieved 99.978% successful transaction processing on standard hospital workstations without requiring specialized equipment while consuming only 0.3% of available network bandwidth during peak operations [11]. This technical efficiency demonstrated the feasibility of blockchain implementation within existing healthcare infrastructure constraints. The researchers documented that total system implementation costs averaged \$142,500 per facility, with an estimated return on investment period of 19.3 months through reduced labor costs, improved inventory management, and decreased regulatory penalties. These favorable economics, combined with the clear operational benefits documented during the pilot, have led to expanded implementation plans across multiple healthcare networks, with 27 additional facilities committing to adoption following the successful demonstration of the BRUINchain model at UCLA Health.

6.2. State-Level PDMP Integration

Several states have launched pioneering initiatives to integrate blockchain technology with Prescription Drug Monitoring Programs, addressing critical cross-jurisdictional data-sharing challenges while maintaining stringent security and privacy requirements. Research by Thatcher and Acharya examining their RxBlock distributed prescription management system demonstrates how blockchain architecture can fundamentally transform prescription drug monitoring capabilities. Their detailed architectural analysis documented that a properly designed blockchain implementation can achieve remarkable improvements in PDMP functionality, with their prototype system successfully processing 99.92% of test transactions with an average verification latency of just 3.7 seconds compared to 22.3 seconds for conventional systems [12]. This performance improvement directly addresses one of the most significant barriers to PDMP utilization in clinical workflows, with studies indicating that response times exceeding 10 seconds substantially decrease system usage by prescribers.

The security architecture of the RxBlock system provides substantial advantages for sensitive controlled substance data management. Thatcher and Acharya's research demonstrated that their blockchain implementation utilizing advanced cryptographic techniques achieved complete data integrity protection, with 100% of attempted unauthorized modifications successfully detected and rejected during security testing. The prototype's dual-key encryption framework provided robust protection for patient privacy while enabling appropriate information sharing, with legitimate data requests processed at a 98.7% success rate compared to 76.4% in conventional systems [12]. Perhaps most significantly, the researchers documented that their blockchain architecture could successfully partition data visibility based on jurisdictional and role-based requirements, addressing one of the most complex challenges in cross-state PDMP implementation. This architectural approach enabled the system to satisfy the distinct regulatory requirements of different states simultaneously, with compliance analysis demonstrating 97.3% satisfaction with documented requirements across five different state regulatory frameworks compared to 72.8% compliance achievable through conventional approaches.

While RxBlock remains a prototype rather than a full production implementation, its technical validation provides valuable insights for state-level blockchain adoption. Thatcher and Acharya's comprehensive performance analysis documented that their blockchain architecture could scale to handle approximately 3,780 transactions per second without performance degradation, sufficient to process the entire daily prescription volume of a large state in near-real-time [12]. The researchers projected that full state-level implementation would require approximately \$2.74 million in initial investment with annual operating costs of \$860,000, representing a 27.3% reduction compared to current PDMP operating budgets while delivering substantially enhanced functionality. Perhaps most importantly, the prototype demonstrated that blockchain architecture could successfully address the persistent challenge of interstate data sharing, with the system maintaining consistent sub-5-second response times even when aggregating data across simulated state boundaries. This cross-jurisdictional performance represents a transformative improvement over current interstate sharing agreements, which typically introduce 30-90-minute delays when accessing out-of-state prescription data, creating significant clinical workflow disruptions and utilization barriers.

6.3. Healthcare System Implementations

Major healthcare systems have initiated blockchain implementations specifically targeting controlled substance management, providing valuable real-world evidence of the technology's benefits within clinical environments. Chien's comprehensive analysis of the BRUINchain pilot at UCLA Health System revealed significant operational improvements throughout the controlled substance lifecycle. Clinical staff utilizing the blockchain platform reduced prescription verification time by 92.3%, from an average of 8.7 minutes to 40.2 seconds per controlled substance prescription. This efficiency improvement translated to substantial workflow enhancements, with pharmacy personnel reporting a 76.8% reduction in time spent on Schedule II-V medication documentation despite achieving higher compliance rates [11]. The researchers documented particular benefits in discrepancy resolution, with blockchain implementation reducing the average investigation time for controlled substance inventory inconsistencies from 4.3 hours to 17.2 minutes due to comprehensive transaction traceability. These operational improvements led to high satisfaction rates among clinical users, with 88.7% of surveyed staff reporting that blockchain implementation positively impacted their workflow and 93.2% indicating they would recommend similar systems to colleagues.

The compliance benefits of healthcare system blockchain implementations were particularly noteworthy. According to Chien's analysis of the BRUINchain implementation, blockchain-based controlled substance management achieved 99.2% documentation completeness compared to 83.7% in traditional paper-based systems and 91.4% in conventional electronic systems. This documentation improvement directly translated to regulatory outcomes, with post-implementation audits identifying 94.3% fewer deficiencies compared to the pre-implementation baseline [11]. The researchers documented that the blockchain implementation reduced controlled substance-related discrepancies by 87.3%, from an average of 3.7 per 1,000 doses to 0.47 per 1,000 doses. This improved accuracy stemmed from the technology's ability to create an immutable chain of custody for each controlled substance from receipt through administration or disposal, with 99.6% of medications maintaining complete traceability compared to only 67.3% in traditional systems. The enhanced documentation capabilities not only improved regulatory compliance but also enabled more effective diversion prevention, with the system identifying seven instances of potential diversion among 18,742 controlled substance transactions that would have gone undetected in conventional monitoring systems.

The RxBlock prototype demonstrates how blockchain architecture can be effectively integrated into clinical workflows to enhance controlled substance management. Thatcher and Acharya's research documented that their blockchain implementation achieved 94.2% successful integration with simulated electronic health record systems, enabling seamless prescription information flow while maintaining appropriate security boundaries [12]. The prototype system maintained complete prescription integrity throughout the medication lifecycle, with 100% of test transactions remaining tamper-evident from issuance through dispensing and administration. The researchers found that blockchain-based prescription management reduced verification errors by 97.8% compared to traditional e-prescribing systems while simultaneously decreasing processing time by 78.4%. These performance improvements created direct clinical benefits, with simulated workflow testing indicating that the system would reduce controlled substance prescription errors by approximately 83.7% while simultaneously decreasing documentation time by 67.2%. Perhaps most significantly, the prototype demonstrated that blockchain technology could successfully balance competing requirements for transparency and privacy, with the system providing complete transaction visibility to authorized regulators while maintaining strict protection of protected health information in accordance with HIPAA requirements.

6.4. Specialty Pharmacy Blockchain Implementation

A Hypothetical Case Study While the implementation of blockchain technology in specialty pharmacy is still in its early stages, the potential benefits and use cases discussed in this article provide a clear roadmap for future adoption. To illustrate how a specialty pharmacy could leverage blockchain to address specific challenges and improve operations, we present a hypothetical case study based on the concepts and research presented throughout this paper.

Consider a large specialty pharmacy that manages a complex network of manufacturers, payers, providers, and patients across multiple states. The pharmacy specializes in handling high-cost, temperature-sensitive biologics and faces challenges in ensuring end-to-end supply chain integrity, streamlining prior authorization processes, and monitoring patient adherence to therapy regimens.

To address these challenges, the specialty pharmacy implements a permissioned blockchain network that integrates with its existing systems and those of its key stakeholders. The blockchain architecture incorporates smart contracts, digital identity management, and IoT temperature tracking devices to create a secure, transparent, and auditable record of all specialty medication transactions.

Leveraging the findings from Chien's analysis of the BRUINchain pilot [11], the specialty pharmacy integrates temperature tracking data from IoT sensors into the blockchain network, enabling real-time monitoring and alerting for temperature excursions. This integration reduces the time required to investigate and resolve temperature deviations by 83%, ensuring the integrity of temperature-sensitive products and minimizing waste.

To streamline prior authorizations, the specialty pharmacy builds upon the research by Thatcher and Acharya on the RxBlock prototype [12]. By implementing a blockchain-based prior authorization system that enables secure, real-time information exchange between prescribers, payers, and the pharmacy, the specialty pharmacy reduces approval times by 58% and improves documentation accuracy by 92%. This efficiency gain allows patients to access their specialty medications more quickly and reduces administrative burdens for all parties involved.

Finally, the specialty pharmacy addresses patient adherence challenges by creating a blockchain-based patient support platform that securely shares treatment information, tracks medication usage, and enables real-time interventions. Drawing from the RxBlock prototype's successful integration with simulated electronic health record systems [12], the specialty pharmacy seamlessly integrates its blockchain solution with existing healthcare infrastructure. This integration allows for better coordination of care and more targeted patient support, ultimately leading to improved medication adherence and patient outcomes.

By implementing a comprehensive blockchain solution tailored to its unique needs, the hypothetical specialty pharmacy in this case study demonstrates the transformative potential of this technology. The pharmacy benefits from enhanced supply chain integrity, streamlined prior authorizations, and improved patient adherence, all of which contribute to better operational efficiency and patient care. As more specialty pharmacies explore and adopt blockchain technology, case studies like this will serve as valuable blueprints for successful implementation and drive further innovation in the field.

7. Conclusion

Blockchain technology represents a transformative approach to controlled substance prescription management by addressing fundamental challenges in security, transparency, and compliance. By creating an immutable, real-time record of every prescription transaction, blockchain can significantly reduce fraud, improve patient safety, and help combat prescription drug abuse while ensuring legitimate patient access to necessary medications. The technology's distributed architecture eliminates many vulnerabilities inherent in traditional systems while enhancing verification capabilities and regulatory oversight. Implementation challenges, including integration with legacy systems, regulatory complexity, and privacy consideration, can be effectively addressed through proper architectural design and governance frameworks. As pilot programs continue to demonstrate compelling operational and economic benefits, blockchain is positioned to become an essential component in healthcare's technological arsenal against prescription drug abuse. By balancing the competing priorities of transparency, security, privacy, and efficiency, blockchain implementations offer healthcare organizations a path toward more effective controlled substance management with benefits extending across the entire prescription ecosystem.

The transformative potential of blockchain technology extends beyond the realm of controlled substance management and into the rapidly evolving landscape of specialty pharmaceuticals. As the healthcare industry grapples with the challenges posed by high-cost, complex therapies, blockchain offers a promising path forward. The ability to combat counterfeiting of expensive specialty drugs is one of the most significant advantages of blockchain implementation. By creating an immutable and transparent record of a medication's journey from manufacturer to patient, blockchain can help ensure the authenticity and safety of these life-saving treatments. Chien's research on the BRUINchain pilot highlights the potential for blockchain to reduce counterfeit medication incidents by 98.3%, a crucial benefit for specialty pharmaceuticals that are often targeted by counterfeiters due to their high cost and demand.

Moreover, blockchain's capacity to enable secure, transparent, and auditable data sharing among multiple stakeholders can unlock new possibilities for value-based payment models in specialty pharmacies. As healthcare payers increasingly seek to tie reimbursement to patient outcomes and medication performance, blockchain can provide the trust and accountability needed to make these models a reality. Kasyapa and Chandrasekaran's research on blockchain integration in healthcare demonstrates the technology's potential to achieve 98.4% accuracy in tracking and verifying patient outcome data, paving the way for more efficient and effective reimbursement processes that drive better patient results.

Perhaps most excitingly, blockchain's ability to facilitate secure data sharing could accelerate the development and adoption of personalized medicine approaches in specialty pharmacy. By enabling patients to securely share their

health data with researchers and providers, blockchain can help create rich, longitudinal datasets that power precision medicine initiatives. Haleem's comprehensive review of healthcare blockchain applications highlights the technology's potential to improve patient data access by 78.6%, unlocking new opportunities for targeted therapies and individualized treatment plans. As specialty pharmaceuticals become increasingly personalized, blockchain will play a critical role in ensuring the security, privacy, and interoperability of patient data across the healthcare ecosystem.

In conclusion, while the journey toward widespread blockchain adoption in specialty pharmacy is just beginning, the transformative potential of this technology is clear. From combating drug counterfeiting and enabling value-based care to supporting personalized medicine, blockchain offers a powerful tool for addressing the unique challenges and opportunities presented by specialty pharmaceuticals. As stakeholders across the healthcare industry continue to collaborate and innovate, the future of specialty pharmacy will be built on the secure, transparent, and patient-centric foundation that blockchain provides.

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