Numerous qualities can distinguish great physicians from their good counterparts. With the romanticized lives of doctors equaling entertainment gold, several contemporary books, television shows, and movies explore the traits of a great doctor: diagnostic acumen, wise therapeutic selection, compassion, etc. Less compelling, it seems, is the notion of the “great” patient, the ideal individual who dutifully reports all relevant medical, personal, and social history; is educated but not over-informed; active in medical care decisions but deferential to the physician’s medical expertise; and, of course, compliant with treatment instructions. That last bit is essential to the “ideal” patient. Let’s face it: regardless of a dermatologist’s training or skill, compliance is the great equalizer in the clinic.

The pharmaceutical industry, urged by physicians, is creating medications that are more “user friendly.” As Joseph Bikowski, MD explains in this month’s cover story (p. 32), drug manufacturers and marketers are reformulating numerous topical medications to produce novel or improved formulation bases, limit side effects, enhance efficacy, and in some cases decrease demands on patients. By devising new vehicles, topical drug developers are decreasing the number of separate products patients must use and limiting the number of daily applications. The end result could be more compliant patients who have more rapid and more consistent therapeutic response.

Improving vehicles to promote compliance offers benefits to patients and physicians. And the pharmaceutical industry benefits, too. Patient friendly formulations will garner more scripts. But physician prescribing is just one element of the equation. Drug marketers can’t make money if patients don’t fill—and refill—prescriptions. A recent industry survey revealed that the average pharmaceutical brand loses 38 percent of its sales to non-compliance and says non-compliance could cost the industry more than $300 billion in lost revenues (data reported by Cutting Edge Information). Company-sponsored patient compliance and disease management programs may improve the bottom-line, Cutting Edge reports, while providing “societal benefits,” such as improved public health and decreased healthcare costs. Already some pharmaceutical companies serving dermatology offer comprehensive patient education programs and health management resources. Others should do the same.

Whether altruism, a sense of responsibility to consumers, or merely the promise of increased revenues inspires companies to launch meaningful patient support programs doesn’t matter. What matters is that these programs, together with patient education by the physician and the availability of more “user-friendly” medications, can lead to improved patient compliance and better therapeutic outcomes.