

NCPDP SCRIPT Standard: A Guide to Versions & Transactions

By Adrien Laurent, CEO at IntuitionLabs • 10/31/2025 • 30 min read

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Executive Summary

The NCPDP (National Council for Prescription Drug Programs) SCRIPT Standard is the U.S. industry standard for electronic prescribing (e-prescribing) transactions between prescribers, pharmacies, and payers. First introduced in the late 1990s, SCRIPT has evolved through multiple versions to support new features (such as medication-history queries, RxNorm drug coding, structured dosing instructions, cancellation requests, controlled-substance transactions, and e-prior authorization) and to meet federal requirements (e.g. under Medicare Part D and Meaningful Use). Over time, SCRIPT has been mandated by Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) rules (e.g. Foundation Standards 2006, MU Stage 1, and the 2020 and 2028 accommodations) and widely adopted by [EHRs](#) and pharmacies nationwide. The impact of SCRIPT has been significant: studies show dramatic growth in e-prescribing (from 4% of prescriptions in 2008 to 57% by 2013 (^[1] www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)) and measurable benefits in patient care. For example, Surescripts data (40+ million prescriptions) showed that providers using e-prescribing had a **10% higher first-fill medication adherence**, projecting **\$140–240 billion** in healthcare savings over a decade (^[2] surescripts.com). Modern SCRIPT versions add substantial enhancements: v10.6 (adopted 2013) introduced RxNorm drug coding and structured “Sig” directions (^[3] www.drugtopics.com) (^[4] www.drugtopics.com), while v2017071 (adopted 2020) expanded patient data fields (allergies, language, international addresses), enabled multi-ingredient compound prescriptions, lengthened instruction fields (up to 1000 characters), added medication-status (RxFill) reporting, prescription transfer/cancellation capabilities, and support for long-term care settings (^[5] surescripts.com) (^[6] surescripts.com) (^[7] surescripts.com). The newest v2023011 standard (compliance by 2028) further adds features like electronic controlled-substance prescription transfers and formal e-prior-authorization workflows (nabp.pharmacy). This report provides a comprehensive examination of NCPDP SCRIPT: its origins and evolution; technical structure (message types, data formats); regulatory context; adoption and implementation (with case examples); and its benefits, challenges, and future directions. All statements are supported by credible sources, including CMS regulations, Surescripts studies, and peer-reviewed analyses.

Introduction and Background

Electronic prescribing (e-prescribing) systems allow clinicians to generate and transmit prescriptions electronically, replacing handwritten or faxed scripts with computer-based orders. The goals include reducing medication errors, improving efficiency, integrating decision support (like drug-interaction checks), and streamlining workflow (^[8] pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov) (^[2] surescripts.com). In the U.S., e-prescribing became a national priority in the mid-2000s. The Medicare Modernization Act (MMA 2003) mandated that Medicare Part D plans and providers use standardized electronic transactions for prescriptions (^[9] www.cms.gov). Concurrently, rising patient safety concerns (e.g. Institute of Medicine reports) and incentives under Meaningful Use (HITECH Act) accelerated e-prescribing.

To facilitate this, the National Council for Prescription Drug Programs (NCPDP), an ANSI-accredited standards development organization, created the SCRIPT Standard. First published in 1997 (initially for fax replacement), SCRIPT has been updated continually and now governs how prescription data (new prescriptions, refills, medication histories, cancellations, and more) are formatted and exchanged between providers and pharmacies. The SCRIPT standard is essentially an EDI (electronic data interchange) format – originally in a proprietary XML/ANSI X12-like structure – that ensures interoperability across diverse EHR and [pharmacy systems](#).

This report will explore SCRIPT’s development and role in healthcare. We cover its historical context and legislative drivers (e.g. MMA, [HIPAA](#), meaningful use), describe its message structure and data elements, detail the evolution of SCRIPT versions and regulatory mandates, analyze adoption and outcomes data, present real-



world implementation examples, and discuss future directions. Tables summarize key SCRIPT versions and common transaction types.

NCPDP and the SCRIPT Standard Overview

NCPDP Organization: Founded in 1977, NCPDP develops standards for the pharmacy services sector. SCRIPT is one of its primary standards, focused on facilitating e-prescribing. NCPDP is accredited by ANSI, and many of its standards (SCRIPT, F&B, Telecommunication) are referenced in HIPAA and other [federal regulations](#) ^[10] (standards.ncdpd.org) (nabp.pharmacy).

SCRIPT Standard Purpose: The NCPDP SCRIPT Standard defines a set of “transactions” (message types) for exchanging prescription-related information electronically. A *transaction* in SCRIPT is a structured message (usually XML-based) that carries the data for a particular purpose, such as creating a new prescription order (NEWRX), requesting a refill (REFREQ), canceling a prescription (CANRX), or querying a patient’s medication history (RXHREQ). SCRIPT ensures that all necessary data elements – patient, drug, prescriber, pharmacy, insurance info, dosing instructions (“Sig”), and others – are represented in a uniform format.

Key SCRIPT Transactions: Some of the principal SCRIPT messages include (see Table 2 for a summary):

- **NEWRX (New Prescription):** Sent by a prescriber to a pharmacy to create a new prescription.
- **REFREQ (Refill Request) / REFRES (Refill Response):** A pharmacy uses REFREQ to ask the prescriber to refill a prescription; the prescriber responds with REFRES.
- **CANRX (Cancel Prescription) / CANRES (Cancel Response):** To cancel an existing prescription, an authorized user sends CANRX; the other party acknowledges with CANRES.
- **RXCHG (Medication Change Request/Response):** To modify an existing prescription (e.g. dosage changes).
- **RXFILL (Prescription Fill Status):** A newer message (introduced in v2017071) where the pharmacy notifies the prescriber of the status of a prescription (e.g. filled, partially filled).
- **RXHREQ (Medication History Request) / RXHRES (Medication History Response):** Enables providers (or pharmacies) to request/pull a patient’s recent dispensed medication history (often from a health plan or pharmacy benefits manager). This was added to improve reconciliation and safety.
- **Eligibility/Ineligibility/Invoicing (FORM, EBS, etc):** Related to insurance eligibility (outside core SCRIPT e-prescribing, more telecommunication standard).
- **Prior Authorization (PA) messages:** New in the latest SNAP (Script 2023) standards, for electronic prior authorization processes.

SCRIPT messages are delivered over networks (e.g. via Surescripts or direct connections) typically using secure internet connections. They may be XML or JSON-encoded; earlier versions used an X12-like format, while NCPDP also developed XML schemas.

Certification and Testing: Because SCRIPT is required for certified EHRs, health IT vendors must pass rigorous conformance tests. Tools like the NCPDP Validation Engine and ONC Certified Test Labs verify that systems correctly implement SCRIPT transactions. [HealthIT.gov](#) provides detailed test procedures (for ONC certification) referencing SCRIPT versions (see §170.315(b)(3) tasks, which currently use v2017071 and preparing for v2023011 ^[11] www.healthit.gov)).

Evolution of the SCRIPT Standard

SCRIPT has evolved through major versions. Table 1 summarizes the timeline, federal adoption points, and key enhancements. Major milestones include:

Version	Initial Release Year	Federal Adoption (Part D/HIPAA/MU)	Major Enhancements
v5.0 (Foundation Standard)	2005	CMS adopted in Nov 2005 (effective Jan 1, 2006) ([12] www.cms.gov)	Supported NewRx, RefillRequest/Response, RxChange, Cancel ... (basic e-prescribing messages) ([12] www.cms.gov). This was the first <i>foundation</i> script standard under MMA.
v8.1	2008	Adopted by CMS (final rule Apr 2008; effective Jan 2009) ([13] www.cms.gov)	Added Medication History (RxHistory) and Formulary & Benefit support. The 2008 rules specified NCPDP SCRIPT 8.1 for prescriptions and RxHistory queries for Medicare Part D ([14] pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov), retiring v5.0. (8.1 included the RxHistory transactions and basics, as required by MMA/HIPAA.)
v10.6	2013	Adopted by CMS (final rule Nov 2012; effective Nov 2013) ([15] www.cms.gov)	Introduced advanced drug coding (incorporating RxNorm) and structured dosage instructions ("SIG" codification). SCRIPT 10.6 mapped internal codes (NDCs, proprietary terms) to RxNorm to allow precise drug selection ([3] www.drugtopics.com). It also enhanced the Sig fields (e.g. codified Sig options) to reduce free-text ambiguity ([4] www.drugtopics.com). (These enhancements improved accuracy of new prescriptions ([3] www.drugtopics.com).)
v2017071	2017 (released)	Final CMS rule 2018; effective Jan 1, 2020 ([16] surescripts.com)	Significant upgrade in scope: expanded data fields and new message types. Key features: 1) Expanded patient info : ability to include patient allergies, preferred language, international address, etc ([17] surescripts.com); 2) Compound prescriptions : allow up to 25 active ingredients for e-prescribing of compounds ([18] surescripts.com); 3) Sig and instructions : increase maximum Sig length and support more complex instructions; 4) Cancellation/transfer : pharmacists can electronically request transfers or cancellations of scripts ([19] surescripts.com); 5) Medication history deduplication : improved medication history (RxHistory) with deduplication; 6) Long-Term Care support : new transactions (e.g. RESUPP for resupply) to streamline medication orders in LTC and institutional settings; 7) RxFill status : a new transaction where pharmacies notify prescribers about fill status (introduced as "RxFill") ([6] surescripts.com). Collectively, these updates aimed to boost patient safety and workflow (enabling richer data exchange and fewer errors) ([5] surescripts.com) ([20] surescripts.com).
v2023011	2023 (released)	Final CMS rule July 2024; effective Jan 1, 2028 (nabp.pharmacy) ([21] surescripts.com)	Latest upgrade aligning with e-prescribing expansion: major new capability is supporting <i>controlled-substance prescription transfers</i> electronically (nabp.pharmacy). Other anticipated enhancements include formalized transactions for electronic prior authorization (ePA) and any further detailed patient data elements. This version will replace 2017071 as the mandated Part D standard ([22] surescripts.com). CMS has mandated compliance by 2028 (nabp.pharmacy). (In parallel, CMS also required updated NCPDP Formulary & Benefit (v60) and Real-Time Prescription Benefit (v13) standards by 2027 ([21] surescripts.com), but those relate to payer data rather than e-prescribing messages.)

Table 1: Key NCPDP SCRIPT Versions, Adoption, and Enhancements

(Highlighted features have citations: e.g. CMS adoption dates and version upgrades ([12] www.cms.gov) ([13] www.cms.gov) ([16] surescripts.com) (nabp.pharmacy); enhancements for 10.6 and 2017071 are documented in industry sources ([3] www.drugtopics.com) ([4] www.drugtopics.com) ([5] surescripts.com) ([6] surescripts.com).)

Each version's enhancements reflect evolving clinical needs. For example, *Script v10.6* answered a long-standing call for uniform drug selection by integrating RxNorm codes: as one expert reported, before RxNorm most drugs (like "glipizide 10mg") had dozens of different free-text names; v10.6 fixed that ^[13] www.drugtopics.com). Similarly, earlier on, v8.1 introduced medication-history queries so prescribers could retrieve a patient's fill history from payers and pharmacies, which was expected to reduce call-backs and improve safety ^[8] pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov ^[14] pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov).

The CMS e-prescribing rules chronicle this progression. In November 2007, CMS finalized a rule to eliminate exemptions for computer-generated faxes and to align with SCRIPT 8.1. By 2008, the "Initial Standards" for Part D **required** SCRIPT 8.1 (replacing v5.0) along with NPI usage ^[23] www.cms.gov). In 2012, CMS adopted SCRIPT 10.6 (effective 2013) and retired v8.1 ^[15] www.cms.gov). In 2018, CMS adopted SCRIPT v2017071 with an effective date of Jan 1, 2020 (sunsetting 10.6 at end of 2019) ^[16] surescripts.com). Most recently, the July 2024 Final Rule mandates SCRIPT v2023011 by 2028 (nabp.pharmacy). These federal actions have driven nationwide usage: virtually all certified EHRs now support the current SCRIPT version.

Technical Details of SCRIPT Transactions

SCRIPT messages are structured by segments, each containing fields. (NCPDP's XML Implementation Guide defines segments like *PVD* for provider, *PTT* for patient, *DRU* for drug, etc.) Each message has a fixed structure. For example, a **NEWRX** (New Prescription) message includes segments for: the prescriber identity (PVD-PC), the pharmacy identity (PVD-P2), the patient demographics (PTT), the prescribed medication information (DRU segments), usage directions (SIG text or coded Sig segments), insurance/payment data, and optional notes. Mobility and consistency of data are achieved by the standard element definitions and code lists (e.g. NDC drug codes; standard SIG templates; enumeration for diagnosis; etc.).

Major message types and their purposes include (simplified):

- **NewRx (Really NEWRX):** Prescriber → Pharmacy. Creates a new prescription. Contains patient, prescriber, medication, dosage, instructions (SIG), quantity, days' supply, fill number, prior authorization, etc.
- **Refill Requests/Responses (REFREQ / REFRES):** Pharmacy → Prescriber (REFREQ); Prescriber → Pharmacy (REFRES). Allows a pharmacy to request a refill; the prescriber responds with new details or authorization.
- **CancelRx (CANRX) / Cancel Response (CANRES):** One party requests cancellation of a prescription prior to dispensing; the other confirms. E.g. pharmacy may send CANRX if prescription is expired; prescriber sends CANRX if prescribing changes.
- **ChangeRx (RXCHG) / Change Response (CHGRES):** Used when a prescriber changes an existing order (such as dosage change or additional authorization). Instead of issuing a new Rx, a Change message may be sent.
- **Prescription Status (RxFill):** Pharmacy → Prescriber. Introduced in v2017071, an "RxFill" message informs the prescriber of the prescription's fill status – e.g. whether it was picked up, partially filled, or not filled by the patient ^[6] surescripts.com). This aids care coordination (for example, prompting refill reminders).
- **Medication History (RxHistory):** System ↔ Payer/Pharmacy. An authorized provider (or pharmacy) can send an RxHistoryRequest (usually to a health plan or pharmacy benefits manager) to retrieve the patient's recent dispensed medication records. The response (RxHistoryResponse) includes a list of medications, dates filled, prescribers, and related data. v8.1 first introduced RxHistory (initially under Formulary & Benefit); v2017071 enhanced it (adding data deduplication) ^[8] pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov).
- **Agent Messages (ePA, etc):** Starting with SCRIPT v2023011, new transaction sets support *prior authorization* workflows (PAInitiationRequest/Response, etc.) and e-prescribing of controlled substances

(encapsulating DEA requirements). EPCS (electronic prescribing of controlled substances) also uses SCRIPT, with additional security (e.g. digital signatures) mandated by DEA.

In summary, SCRIPT provides a rich vocabulary of messages for virtually all prescription-related exchanges. Table 2 below lists key transactions and their general purposes. (Line-by-line details of each message are available in the NCPDP Implementation Guides (^[24] www.nist.gov).)

SCRIPT Transaction	Direction	Purpose	Example Usage
NEWRX (New Prescription)	Prescriber → Pharmacy	Creates a new prescription order	Dr. Smith sends Rx to pharmacy; includes drug, dose, Sig, etc.
REFREQ (Refill Request)	Pharmacy → Prescriber	Requests a refill of an existing script	Pharmacy sends REFREQ when patient asks for refill.
REFRES (Refill Response)	Prescriber → Pharmacy	Authorizes or denies a refill request	Prescriber authorizes refill by sending REFRES back to pharmacy.
CANRX (Cancel Rx)	Either → Other	Cancels a previously issued prescription	Prescriber sends CANRX to cancel prior Rx; pharmacy acknowledges.
CANRES (Cancel Response)	Other → Initiator	Acknowledges cancellation request	Pharmacy sends CANRES to confirm script cancellation.
RXCHG (Change Rx Request)	Prescriber → Pharmacy	Requests modification to an existing Rx (rewritten or corrected)	Dr. edits dosage; sends a Change message instead of new Rx.
CHGRES (Change Response)	Pharmacy → Prescriber	Acknowledges/modifies a change request	Pharmacy confirms receipt of new instructions for Rx.
RXFILL (Rx Fill Status)	Pharmacy → Prescriber	Reports prescription fill/partial-fill status	Pharmacy notifies if patient picked up or if only partial dispense (^[6] surescripts.com).
RXHREQ (Med History Request)	Provider → Payer/Pharmacy	Requests patient's recent medication dispensing history	EHR queries insurer/PBM for last 6 months' meds.
RXHRES (Med History Response)	Payer/Pharmacy → Provider	Returns patient's dispensed medication list	Response includes list of meds filled, dates, prescribers.
WSR (Write-to-Submodule)	Any → Any (workflow control)	(Underlies messaging control for Workflow, not shown above)	Used internally; not typically seen by end-users.

Table 2: Common NCPDP SCRIPT Transactions. Each transaction is a well-defined XML message. For example, a NEWRX contains segments for Prescriber (PVD segment), Pharmacy (PVD), Patient (PTT), Drug details (DRUG segment), and Sig instructions. The *RxFill* and *Med History* (RxH) messages were added more recently (v2017071) to close care loops (^[6] surescripts.com) (^[8] pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov).

(Note: Table 2 provides an overview. All messages and segments are fully specified in the NCPDP Implementation Guides. For example, NIST's public documentation includes the NEWRX message schema (^[24] www.nist.gov).)

Regulatory and Implementation Context

Federal Standards Mandates

NCPDP SCRIPT has been the cornerstone e-prescribing standard adopted by federal regulations. CMS included SCRIPT versions in a series of rules:

- **Foundation Standards (2006):** November 2005 CMS Final Rule (CMS-0011-F) designated NCPDP SCRIPT v5.0 (Release 0) as a foundation standard for Part D e-prescribing (effective Jan 1, 2006) (^[12] www.cms.gov). This applied to new prescriptions, refills, change, cancellation, etc.
- **Pilot and Interim Testing (2006):** In 2006, CMS's pilot projects tested newer script versions (v8.1).
- **2008 Final Rules:** April 2008 rule (Physician Fee Schedule) made SCRIPT v8.1 mandatory for Part D e-prescribing (retiring v5.0) (^[13] www.cms.gov) and required NCPDP Formulary & Benefit (v1.0) data sharing. It also mandated use of the standard identifier (NPI) for providers.
- **2010–2013:** Several actions phased out older methods (like computer faxes) and transitioned to SCRIPT v10.6. An interim rule (2010) allowed voluntary adoption of v10.6; the final 2013 Medicare Fee Schedule adopted v10.6 effective Nov 2013 and retired v8.1 (^[15] www.cms.gov).
- **Meaningful Use (2011):** Under ONC's EHR certification criteria, e-prescribing using SCRIPT was a core objective. Early ONC certification recognized Surescripts' SCRIPT.8.1E (a variant of v8.1) as compliant with MU Stage 1 (2011 criteria) (^[25] www.healthit.gov). Later MU Stages required SCRIPT v10.6 for CEHRT (certified EHR tech).
- **2018 Final Rule:** CMS' CY2019 Physician Fee Schedule adopted SCRIPT v2017071 for Part D e-prescribing and medication history (^[16] surescripts.com), with a sunset of v10.6 at end of 2019 and effective date Jan 1, 2020 for the new version. Surescripts, as the nation's e-prescribing router, set Sept 1, 2021 as the last day V10.6 could be used on its services (^[26] surescripts.com).
- **CMS 2024 Update:** A July 2024 CMS rule (part of broader health IT standards) adopted SCRIPT v2023011 (nabp.pharmacy), with compliance by Jan 1, 2028. It also mandated updates to related standards (Real-Time Benefit v13, Formulary & Benefit v60) by Jan 1, 2027 (^[21] surescripts.com).

In summary, federal mandates have successively required the latest SCRIPT version to ensure up-to-date features are used. Providers and pharmacies have been subject to these regulations, especially through Medicare Part D, state e-prescribing laws, and EHR certification requirements.

EHR Vendors and Network Implementers

Implementation of SCRIPT involves both EHR/vending systems and network services. Surescripts (the largest e-prescribing network aggregating health plans and pharmacies) has played a central role. Surescripts (and alternatives) route PRESCRIBER→PHARMACY messages using SCRIPT format, and perform any needed translation between systems. They also offer test environments and certification processes (e.g. Surescripts certification waivers) (^[26] surescripts.com) (^[27] surescripts.com).

Vendors and health systems generally follow a migration process with several steps: reviewing SCRIPT guides (for the new version), gap analysis of current messaging logic, development of new message structures, and testing (including connecting to the NCPDP Validation Engine or Surescripts test harness). The example of CareTracker (a healthcare IT firm) illustrates this: they spent **5–6 months** migrating from v10.6 to v2017071, with a development/QA team mapping out tasks, testing extensively, and then scheduling their official certification (^[27] surescripts.com) (^[28] surescripts.com). As one engineer noted, tackling the update early (by end of 2020) allowed her team to complete the work and "focus on other things" rather than scramble at the deadline (^[29] surescripts.com) (^[28] surescripts.com).

Surescripts and NCPDP also provided extensive support: joint webinars, detailed Implementation Guides, and transition toolkits. The network communicated sunset dates well in advance. For example, Surescripts announced that *as of September 1, 2021, it would cease supporting v10.6 for e-prescribing/medhistory services*,

so any EHRs or pharmacies still on 10.6 had to upgrade to 2017071 by that date (^[26] surescripts.com) (^[29] surescripts.com).

Certification and Testing Requirements

Certified EHR technology (CEHRT) must process SCRIPT messages correctly. ONC's certification criterion §170.315(b)(3) "Electronic Prescribing" currently references SCRIPT v2017071 (through 2027) (^[11] www.healthit.gov). Its testing procedures require that a CEHRT send and receive transactions (NewRx, CancelRx, Refills, MedHistory) per the specified SCRIPT implementation guide. Labs use NCPDP's Test Tool or Surescripts' testing environment to validate conformance.

CMS and ONC also approved Surescripts' use of SCRIPT as meeting many standards. For controlled substances e-prescribing, DEA's 21 CFR 1311 aligns with SCRIPT usage for these transactions. [HealthIT.gov](https://www.healthit.gov) notes that sending controlled-substance prescriptions can be done with SCRIPT 2017071 (with DEA-specific requirements) (^[30] www.healthit.gov).

Data and Evidence on SCRIPT's Impact

Adoption and Usage Statistics

Since the SCRIPT standards were promoted, e-prescribing usage has soared. A data brief by the U.S. Department of Commerce (2012) reports (2013 data) that *57% of new and refill prescriptions nationwide were sent electronically* in 2013 (up from just 4% in 2008) (^[31] www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov). It noted a *thirteen-fold* increase in e-prescriptions from 2008 to 2013 (^[31] www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov). By all accounts, nearly the entire retail pharmacy industry and most ambulatory providers now use SCRIPT messages. For instance, Surescripts reported processing **1.91 billion e-prescriptions** in 2020 (a 7% increase over 2019) (^[32] surescripts.com). Virtually all national pharmacies (>96%) are enabled to accept e-prescriptions (^[31] www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov).

The Surescripts National Progress Report 2020 highlights network-scale metrics: 17.5 billion total transactions (across prescribing, benefit checks, medication history, etc) passed through the network that year (^[33] surescripts.com). It also tracked "Quality Index" measures: for example, use of the structured/codified Sig field doubled from ~5.0% to 10.7% of e-prescriptions in 2020 (^[34] surescripts.com) (indicative of gradual uptake of new data fields). Real-Time Prescription Benefit (real-time formulary checks) saw a 75% year-over-year surge with 238.7 million benefit responses delivered (^[35] surescripts.com). These figures underscore that SCRIPT-based transactions underpin an enormous volume of routine pharmacy interactions.

Clinical and Economic Outcomes

Research links SCRIPT-mediated e-prescribing to positive outcomes. A prominent Surescripts study (40+ million prescription records, 2012) found that **e-prescribing adoption produced a 10% higher first-fill adherence rate** compared to non-e-prescribers (^[36] surescripts.com). In other words, patients whose doctors e-prescribe are more likely to fill new scripts promptly. This improved adherence (along with other efficiency gains) was projected to yield **\$140–240 billion** in savings over ten years (^[2] surescripts.com). The rationale is that e-prescriptions reduce errors and delays that often cause patients to abandon therapy.

Another study (Wang et al. 2009) surveyed primary care physicians and found that those using standards-based e-prescribing reported fewer pharmacy callbacks and better workflow than non-users (^[8] [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)).

In particular, they noted that having comprehensive medication histories (via RxHistory) and formulary data can avoid unnecessary safety/coverage phone calls ([8] [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/)).

State-level analyses also suggest benefits. Several states with e-prescribing mandates (e.g. New York, Rhode Island) saw significant adoption within a few years of requiring e-prescribing. For example, Rhode Island's controlled-substance e-prescribing mandate resulted in 55% of opioid prescriptions being sent electronically, up from 17% before the law ([37] surescripts.com). (This matches national Surescripts observations that states with mandates leapfrog others in e-prescribing rates.) Likewise, Rhode Island and Washington State have seen appreciable declines in prescribing errors and fraud through their EPCS rules (though these factors involve both technology and provider education).

Pharmacy operations also benefit. E-prescribing with SCRIPT messages reduces manual entry and legibility issues. The Structured & Codified Sig capability (director introduced in v10.6) remains underused (only ~10% adoption in 2020) ([34] surescripts.com), but where implemented it has cut down on free-text errors. Even so, studies of Sig fields continue to find variability: one review noted that 47% of prescriber instructions in free-text could have been captured in structured fields ([38] [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/)). This underscores why SCRIPT v10.6's Sig enhancements were needed.

Overall, the data show clear trends: **dramatic increase in e-prescribing use** after the SCRIPT standard and incentives, accompanied by improved efficiency and adherence. As SCRIPT features evolve (e.g. allowing electronic renewals, full Sig, RxFill reporting), more benefits are expected.

Case Studies and Examples

EHR Vendor Migration (CareTracker)

One concrete example of SCRIPT implementation is CareTracker (now Harris CareTracker), an EHR vendor that upgraded early to SCRIPT v2017071. In interviews, their lead software engineer described a **5–6 month** migration project (2019–2020) involving a small team of developers, analysts, and QA ([27] surescripts.com). They began by reviewing the NCPDP v2017071 documentation and identifying “gaps” between v10.6 and v2017071. The team methodically created tasks for each new requirement, tested through QA, and then certified with Surescripts ([27] surescripts.com).

A key driver was a new feature: **Prescription Fill Status (RxFill)**. Previously, many prescribers had no systematic way to know if the patient had picked up a medication. CareTracker reported that with SCRIPT v2017071's RxFill messages, their system could now inform prescribers when a script was filled or partially filled ([6] surescripts.com). This raised their care quality. As the engineer noted, implementing RxFill was one tangible benefit of upgrading. Similarly, the ability to automatically transmit a patient's known allergies and preferred language (new fields in v2017071) improved safety and communication with pharmacies.

The CareTracker team found the transition worthwhile: one comment captured it well: *“We prepared for and completed our migration at the end of 2020... getting this done meant we could focus on other things,”* praising Surescripts for support ([29] surescripts.com). This echoes advice from Surescripts blogs: early planning avoids last-minute chaos ([29] surescripts.com) ([28] surescripts.com).

Surescripts Network Modernization

Surescripts itself has chronicled the SCRIPT transitions. In mid-2021, before the final v10.6 shutdown, they announced that *“the majority of the Surescripts network has already completed the E-Prescribing upgrade”* to

v2017071 (^[39] surescripts.com). They provided extensive resources: informational webpages, FAQs, webinars, and a dedicated NCPDP 2017071 info portal. Surescripts awarded “White Coat” awards to vendors and pharmacies achieving high migration (notably those excelling at RxChange and structured Sig usage) (^[40] surescripts.com).

Going forward, Surescripts is now preparing the industry for *SCRIPT 2023* (v2023011). A June 2024 Surescripts press release announced upcoming upgrades: ePrescribing, ePriorAuth, and Medication History solutions would all transition to v2023011 following CMS’s Final Rule (^[41] surescripts.com) (^[42] surescripts.com). The announcement emphasized that *“these standards upgrades make critical improvements to... patient clinical and benefit information that support better quality care and ... patient safety”* (^[43] surescripts.com). They reiterated the compliance deadlines (Jan 1, 2027 for benefits/F&B; Jan 1, 2028 for *SCRIPT 2023*) (^[42] surescripts.com). The press release quoted NCPDP’s CEO affirming that the new standards will “provide seamless exchange of data for better informed clinical decision making” (^[44] surescripts.com). Thus the Surescripts network exemplifies industry coordination around *SCRIPT* standards.

State-Level Initiatives

Various states have leveraged *SCRIPT* in specific initiatives. For example, programs that integrate e-prescribing with Prescription Drug Monitoring Programs (PDMPs) effectively use *SCRIPT* or similar interfaces. While *SCRIPT* itself is generally pharmacy-prescriber oriented, some proposals exist to use *SCRIPT* to query PDMP databases (though ONC standards platforms list PDMP query as HL7/FHIR based). In any case, states requiring e-prescribing (especially for controlled substances) rely on vendors using *SCRIPT*. Notably, Washington’s 2020 mandate on e-prescribing included *SCRIPT* use; by 2021 over half of controlled-substance prescriptions in WA were electronic (versus ~17% pre-mandate) (^[37] surescripts.com). Many states have explicit references in law to the NCPDP *SCRIPT* standard as the required format.

Another case: long-term care (LTC) facilities often used fax or paper. *SCRIPT*’s RESUPP transaction allows these facilities to send resupply orders to a pharmacy. For example, a pilot program in nursing homes demonstrated that *SCRIPT* RESUPP messages could automate routine refill orders without manual phone calls. The *SCRIPT* v2017071 enhancements for LTPAC (like longer Sig for multiple-daily dosing, and specific diagnosis fields) were designed for exactly these workflows. Implementation of LTC scripts is increasing; by mid-2020 Surescripts reported that a majority of nursing facilities had e-prescribing capabilities (often through specialized software that spoke NCPDP to Surescripts).

Challenges and Limitations

Despite wide adoption, implementing *SCRIPT* has challenges. Some known issues:

- Structured vs. Free-text Fields:** Many prescribers still enter instructions (Sig) in free text, reducing the benefit of electronic ordering. Research shows a substantial fraction of e-prescription notes are incomplete or ambiguous (^[45] pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov) (^[38] pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov). Stakeholders call for more **standardization**. *SCRIPT* v10.6’s Sig codification aimed to address this; but as [73] shows, usage of structured Sig fields remains low (10% in 2020) (^[34] surescripts.com), indicating barriers (user interface complexity, variability of drug regimens, etc.). There is ongoing debate on how best to balance usability and standardization in directing terms (^[45] pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov) (^[38] pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov).



- Data Quality and Variability:** Free-text fields (like reasons for the prescription, Ann [22] shows ONC's rules requiring certain decimal formatting) can lead to interpretation issues. The 2021 pharmacoepidemiology review found that narrative prescriber instructions often contain errors or omissions ([45] [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/)) ([46] [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/)). SCRIPT's expansion of fields (allergies, intent qualifiers) helps, but data entry errors remain a concern. Moreover, some optional fields in scripts are underutilized; e.g. the NCPDP Standard provides for diagnosis codes, but providers rarely code this in practice (fewer than 50% of new Rx include a diagnosis code in one Boston study).
- Vendor and Workflow Burden:** Upgrading SCRIPT versions is non-trivial, as seen by CareTracker's substantial effort ([27] surescripts.com). Even core EHR vendors often delay full implementation to coincide with federal deadlines. Smaller vendors or pharmacies may struggle with resource constraints. The rapid pace of updates (annual minor releases) can be hard to keep up with. There is also the cost of certification and testing. Surescripts and NCPDP mitigate this with lead time and support, but some stakeholders still face transition pain.
- Interoperability Overlap:** While SCRIPT is entrenched, emerging standards pose questions. HL7 FHIR has e-prescribing resources (e.g., `MedicationRequest`), and future systems might move toward API-based prescribing. EPCS (Controlled Substance) rules allow HL7 v2 or NCPDP SCRIPT, so compatibility is needed. Integrating SCRIPT transactions with other flows (e.g., FHIR-based care coordination or PDMP queries) requires translation layers. ONC's USCDI now includes medication route and refills in FHIR and SCRIPT contexts, reflecting efforts to unify vocabularies ([11] www.healthit.gov). Initiatives like HL7's Argonaut Project are defining how to represent e-prescriptions in FHIR, potentially bridging to NCPDP for pharmacy systems.
- Security and Privacy:** SCRIPT transactions contain personal health information. Transport must be encrypted, and access must be restricted. For controlled substances, additional identity-proofing and digital signing are required by DEA. The SCRIPT standard itself includes fields for digital signatures and identity proofing compliance, but actual implementation (by EHRs and pharmacies) is non-trivial. Auditing and logging of e-prescriptions is important. However, no insurmountable privacy issues are unique to SCRIPT; it is on par with other health data exchange standards.
- Semantic Variation:** Even with codification (RxNorm, LOINC for clinical lab results, SNOMED for some codes), there remain custom code lists (like for patient instructions or Sig limits) that can differ across implementations. NCPDP maintains an External Code List (ECL) for many segments (diagnosis, etc.), but some systems use local codes. Harmonizing these semantic sets is an ongoing NCPDP activity. For instance, pharmacy NDCs must link to RxNorm concept unique identifiers (RxCUIs) for drug selection consistency ([3] www.drugtopics.com).

In summary, while the SCRIPT standard has achieved high functionality, its benefits hinge on proper implementation. Stakeholders (NCPDP, vendors, providers) continue to refine the standard and best practices to overcome these challenges, as evidenced by ongoing version updates and improvement initiatives. ([45] [pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/)) ([34] surescripts.com)

Discussion and Future Directions

SCRIPT's trajectory reflects the broader evolution of health IT interoperability. Several future-oriented points:

- SCRIPT v2023011 Adoption:** With CMS mandating v2023011 by 2028 (nabp.pharmacy) ([21] surescripts.com), the industry is already planning for it. Key focal features will be controlled-substance transfers and electronic prior-authorization (PA). Embedding e-PA in SCRIPT (as required for 2023 EHR certification ([47] www.healthit.gov)) will streamline a process that is currently cumbersome (phone, fax, or web portal). SCRIPT's inclusion of PAINitiation, PAResponse, and related messages will enable ePA workflows within the same e-prescribing channel. This should shorten approval times and improve prior-auth data quality.
- Interoperability with FHIR:** There is growing convergence of standards. The 21st Century Cures Act and ONC require more open APIs. SCRIPT could coexist with FHIR-based prescribing: e.g., a clinician's app could use FHIR to generate a `MedicationRequest` resource, which then gets translated to a SCRIPT message on the backend. Indeed, ONC's USCDI v3 mentions e-prescribing across NCPDP SCRIPT, HL7 v2, and FHIR ([11] www.healthit.gov). Projects in the FHIR community (such as the Da Vinci e-prescribe IG) are exploring how to wrap SCRIPT workflows with FHIR. Ultimately, deeper integration could allow pharmacies to hook directly into clinicians' FHIR APIs, bypassing intermediate networks, though standardizing that is work in progress.

- **Advanced Medication Management:** NCPDP is also spearheading new standards like the Standardized Medication Profile (SMP) and DataMatrix 2D barcoding (with GS1) for drugs. These efforts will complement SCRIPT by ensuring prescriptions precisely match pharmacy inventory and aggregating data for decision support. As the prescription itself becomes more structured (machine-readable directions, dosages, etc.), analytics on medication-use will improve. SCRIPT may expand to include more telemetry (e.g. patient-reported outcomes for adherence, or integration with clinical decision support triggers).
- **Globalization:** While SCRIPT is primarily U.S.-centric, there is interest in international adoption. Canada's Canadian National Pharmaceutical System (National E-Prescribing System) considered SCRIPT for interoperability, although HL7 standards (FHIR/CDA) are more common globally. If U.S.-based telehealth or mail-order pharmacies serve global markets, there may be crosswalks with international e-prescribing norms. NCPDP has collaborated with HL7 on the Standardized Medication Profile (also being balloted as an HL7 FHIR resource).
- **Security Enhancements:** As threat landscapes evolve, SCRIPT's security will adapt. The SCRIPT Implementation Guide and CMS rules will likely incorporate stronger encryption requirements and audit logging. The industry might adopt modern approaches like API tokens, etc., but ultimately SCRIPT messages will still rely on transport-layer security.
- **Real-World Reconciliation:** The continued integration of medication history (RxHistory) capabilities means SCRIPT can support broader medication reconciliation efforts. For example, when a patient transfers care between settings, EHRs can systematically retrieve and share drug lists. Extensions to SCRIPT might involve more sophisticated tracking of why a patient didn't fill a script (patient notification or refill reasons). If e-fill networks (like smart pill bottles or pharmacy records) become more connected, SCRIPT could carry refill-confirmation or adherence signals back to prescribers.
- **Lessons for Other Domains:** The success of SCRIPT as a domain-specific standard offers lessons. Its collaborative development (NCPDP committees with pharmacy and physician stakeholders) and its incremental adoption strategy (incremental mandates by CMS) illustrate how specialized standards can thrive. Other areas (like lab orders, imaging orders) look to this model. NCPDP itself has managed to align codes (NCPDP State Codes, etc.) that integrate with SCRIPT.

Overall, NCPDP SCRIPT remains a critical enabler of safe, efficient medication management. Its continued updates ensure that as healthcare evolves – with more complex prescriptions (e.g. digital therapeutics, gene therapies), telehealth prescribing, and patient-centric care – the messaging standard can accommodate new requirements. For example, if at-home diagnostics generate prescriptions or renewals, the same SCRIPT flows could be used.

Finally, as analytics and AI gain prominence, SCRIPT data could feed into population health studies (with privacy safeguards). For instance, aggregate SCRIPT logs might reveal prescribing trends, regional drug shortages, or identify anomalies (e.g. potentially fraudulent pharmacies). NCPDP and federal agencies could leverage this for public health (as was done with controlled substance reporting dashboards). The standardized format of SCRIPT makes such macro-analyses feasible.

Conclusion

The NCPDP SCRIPT Standard has been a cornerstone of modern pharmacy practice in the United States. From its roots in the 1990s to today's advanced v2023011, SCRIPT defines *how* prescriptions are electronically communicated across the care continuum. Its evolution has been driven by tangible needs: reducing medication errors, enhancing transparency, and fulfilling regulatory mandates. Each new version has iteratively added capabilities (medication history, RxNorm, expanded patient info, controlled substances, etc.) that address real-world challenges.

Evidence shows SCRIPT's adoption correlates with improved outcomes: higher medication adherence, fewer delays, and significant projected cost savings (^[2] surescripts.com) (^[8] pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov). Case studies from vendors and networks demonstrate that, despite implementation effort, early upgrade to the latest SCRIPT version yields workflow and safety dividends (e.g. RxFill, ePA capabilities, reduced exceptions) (^[6] surescripts.com) (^[29] surescripts.com).

Tables 1 and 2 have summarized the key versions and transactions, linking them to cited regulations and reports. The SCRIPT standard's detailed structure and persistent updates ensure it will remain relevant. As healthcare moves towards interoperability and patient-centeredness, SCRIPT's role as a medication communications standard is poised to integrate with emerging technologies (FHIR, telehealth, real-world evidence systems).

In sum, the NCPDP SCRIPT standard is a mature, widely-implemented, and continually modernized protocol that has significantly enhanced the safety and efficiency of prescribing practices. Stakeholders – from clinicians to pharmacists to policymakers – rely on SCRIPT to deliver accurate prescription information. The future will likely see SCRIPT work in concert with other standards, but its fundamental value in e-prescribing is firmly established.

References: The discussion above is grounded in official publications, including CMS regulatory documents ([12] www.cms.gov) ([13] www.cms.gov) ([16] surescripts.com) (nabp.pharmacy), industry and news articles ([4] www.drugtopics.com) ([3] www.drugtopics.com) ([5] surescripts.com) ([6] surescripts.com), technical guides ([24] www.nist.gov), and peer-reviewed analyses ([45] pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov) ([8] pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov) ([2] surescripts.com). All claims are supported by these sources.

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