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High-tech system boosts prescription safety

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Published: Monday, March 3, 2008 11:56 PM CST

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With prescription errors believed to cause about 7,000 deaths per year in the United States, pharmacists in Mount Airy are using robotics technology to make a difference.

Mount Airy Drug at 701 W. Pine St. has automated the process through its acquisition of a Parata RDS (robotic dispensing system), according to owner Travis Hall.

"It is a rarity," Hall said Monday. The business owner added that he knows of only one other drugstore in town that has acquired the high-tech system, which carries a price tag of about \$160,000.



Danny Gallimore/The News Travis Hall, the owner of Mount Airy Drug on West Pine Street, checks a prescription on the new robotic dispensing system at the store with the help of pharmacist John Cox, left. The system ensures 100-percent prescription accuracy.

Hall said that concerns about prescription safety were among the reasons Mount Airy Drug acquired the system, which has streamlined the drug-dispensing procedure. It selects and labels a vial, regulates the correct amount of a designated medication and strength directly into the vial, caps the vial and sorts it by patient name - all in about 20 seconds.

The RDS supplied by Parata Systems, a company based in Durham, can process up to 154 prescriptions an hour - and never goes to lunch or takes a break.

"We're not trying to replace people," Hall said of the new system. He explained that letting the machine fill prescriptions frees up pharmacy personnel to spend more time counseling patients, which the medical industry has identified as one key to reducing risk.

The reason for medication errors becoming a major problem nowadays is due simply to sheer numbers. While the use of prescription medication has skyrocketed in recent years, a shortage in pharmacists has occurred. Drugstore personnel have become overwhelmed in some cases and pressured to provide speedy service, which has increased the risk of injury and death from botched prescriptions.

At Mount Airy Drug, for example, Hall says that 400 to 500 prescriptions are processed in a day. "The more you fill, the more chances you have of making mistakes," according to Hall, who said the new system has allowed the business to handle more prescriptions quicker and safer.

"This technology is a significant investment and commitment by our pharmacy to do all we can to ensure our patients' safety," said Hall, who believes the robotics technology will become increasingly popular among drugstores trying to reduce error risk.

Automating the drug-dispensing process has allowed pharmacy personnel to maintain a focus on their role

as patient-care providers even as prescription volume continues to grow, according to Tom Rhoads, Parata's executive vice president.

"I sleep a lot better at night," said Hall.

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