

# Robot aids pharmacists at family health center

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You can't blame Victor Provencia, director of the pharmacy at Sun Life Family Health Center in Casa Grande, for being excited about his new "employee." She's accurate, hardworking, never takes sick days or vacations and never causes problems.

She doesn't say much, but then robots don't talk much. What she does do is dispense prescriptions quickly and accurately, allowing her human counterparts to spend more time with patients.

Technically, the new addition to the pharmacy is a Parata Max robotics system, a fully automated device that dispenses oral solids (pills, tablets and capsules) that make up more than 60 percent of the pharmacy's prescriptions.

Robotics system sounded too impersonal, so employees had a contest and named her E.V.E. (pronounced Evie). The name comes from the movie "WALL-E," but in the pharmacy the acronym stands for Extremely Valuable Employee, not Extraterrestrial Vegetation Evaluator as it did in the movie.

Provencia said the Sun Life staff quickly decided E.V.E. was female because "she's complicated and needs loving care."

The Parata Max system essentially takes up the space that used to house a row of shelving in the center of the pharmacy. It actually consists of two computers, Provencia explained. One is on the front side, where prescriptions can be input and filled prescriptions are dispensed into alphabetically labeled storage trays. Larger bins below hold two sizes of empty prescription bottles and caps. On the back side are the storage bins for different pills, tablets and capsules, and the computer that verifies proper counts as the bins are refilled and as medications are dispensed.

When prescriptions are input into the computer, E.V.E. counts out the designated number of pills, tablets or capsules, places them in the appropriately sized container, caps it and labels it. She can print the labels in English or Spanish and is capable of using several other languages.

"The No. 1 advantage is accuracy," Provencia explained. "It's 100 percent accurate. Any time you have the human factor, you have errors."

E.V.E. has several cross checks to ensure accuracy. Two separate lasers count pills as they are dispensed. Bins in which the pills are stored have bar codes that must be scanned when they are refilled, and the bar code of the container from which the bin is refilled also is scanned. The scans must match.

But E.V.E.'s forte is doing those repetitive tasks that cause human minds to wander — doing them quickly and accurately. She was programmed at the factory for a list of 200 most-frequently-used medications that the Sun Life staff provided to the manufacturer. And she spits out those prescriptions faster and more accurately than a human possibly could.



Steven King/Dispatch, Pharmacist Victor Provencia, right, demonstrates E.V.E., a robot that fills and dispenses prescriptions at the Sun Life Family Health Center in Casa Grande. By using the robot, errors in filling orders are reduced and efficiency is increased, allowing staff to focus their attention on the personal side of patient care.

Provincia said that depending on the day, that means E.V.E. fills anywhere from 65 to 85 percent of the prescriptions coming out of the pharmacy. She can't dispense creams, liquids, eyedrops, inhalers or, for security reasons, narcotics. But she takes the most routine work and does it without complaining.

A staff member does maintenance on E.V.E. each morning, spending 20 to 30 minutes refilling medication compartments. That's time well spent, though, since Provincia said E.V.E. saves the staff "five hours a day of pure counting time."

Eventually, she will be programmed to fill prescriptions at night via an interactive call-in feature. And she can be programmed to call the patients automatically to let them know their prescription is ready.

"Robotics will help us with one of our goals, to streamline patient flow," said Travis Robinette, CEO for Sun Life. "We hope to have the prescription ready before the patient leaves (the clinic after the appointment)."

The bins holding medications even have air filters to prevent "pill dust" escaping into the air, where it could be inhaled by pharmacy staff.

E.V.E.'s efficiency is appreciated in a facility where the number of prescriptions dispensed has risen by more than 100 a day in the last year or two. Throughout Pinal County, Sun Life staff provided care for 100,626 patient visits (a 15 percent increase) to 32,149 patients (a 13 percent increase) during 2009.

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