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Business

Automatic medicine: Vending machines for prescriptions sell convenience

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Bob Donaldson/Post-Gazette

Pharmacy technicians Rita Poljak and Crystal Olack demonstrate the Parata APM machine that remotely distributes filled prescriptions at the Med-Fast Pharmacy inside the Shop 'n Save in Bethel Park.

Self-service technology -- having helped itself to a piece of the business in gas stations, banks, grocery stores, movie rental and hardware chains -- is coming into the pharmacy.

Customers using the Med-Fast Pharmacy inside the Bethel Park Shop 'n Save can walk up to a sort of vending machine, swipe a credit card and pick up a supply of erythromycin even after the pharmacists have gone home for the day. In the month since the machine has been in operation, about 150 people have used it.

The technology has been in the works for years, but it has taken a lot of tinkering for manufacturers to develop versions that are easy for consumers to use and that state pharmacy officials are comfortable will meet security, privacy and information requirements.

Officials at companies competing to carve out space in the nation's retail pharmacies for their machines contend that more than 30 states, including Pennsylvania, now allow their use.

If consumers respond well, manufacturers hope for the kind of momentum seen in the growth of Redbox DVD kiosks at groceries and convenience stores. "I think you're going to see that

same kind of rollout," predicted Jay Blandford, senior director of sales and marketing for Parata, of Durham, N.C.

Parata, which specializes in technology for pharmacies, last year acquired a smaller company that had been developing a prescription delivery machine. That version was the one Med-Fast officials saw at a trade show last year and in which they chose to invest.

"We thought, 'Wow, this could really help our customers get their medications,'" said Gino Cordisco, director of store operations for the 20-store Aliquippa chain, as he showed off the refrigerator-like fixture that can hold more than 450 prescriptions.

The 800-pound device, which is bolted to the floor and tied into alarm systems, sits with one side accessible to employees behind the counter and one available to the consumers on the other side.

Prescriptions are handled in the usual way with employees filling the request. If a customer isn't there for pick-up, bar-coded bags are then stapled to a plastic handle. The employee scans the prescription into a computer, a small slot in the back of the machine opens and a light flashes to show where the bag should be inserted.

Later, an employee can retrieve the bag from the back or a customer who has been set up with an account and a personal identification code can get it through a slot in the front, which has a touch screen and a credit card reader.

The machine also features a telephone that connects to a pharmacist 24 hours a day, said Mr. Cordisco.

Med-Fast chose the Bethel Park site for its first machine in part because the grocery is open 24 hours, while the pharmacy is not. "We're still seeing how this model works out here," said Mr. Cordisco. The chain may add more next year.

Meanwhile, the pharmacy has been giving demonstrations to help customers understand how to use the machine.

Educating consumers seems to be key. "It's like anything brand new," said Linda Pinney, founder and chief business officer of Asteres Inc. in San Diego. Her company makes a similar machine called ScriptCenter, which is in about 30 locations around the country, including a Rite Aid drugstore in eastern Pennsylvania.

Once consumers understand how the devices work, she believes that they'll appreciate the additional option both after hours and when there's a long line at the pharmacy.

Another competitor, Avocare of Tallahassee, Fla., is in talks with retailers for its version, which allows doctors to electronically send prescriptions to a machine. The machine then takes the medicine from its stock and labels it for a specific patient to pick up. The devices are in emergency rooms and doctors' offices.

Prescription delivery machines are more accessible to consumers now than they were when the beta versions were being tested three or four years ago in chains such as Kmart and

Walgreens, said Ms. Pinney. "I think we all made a lot of assumptions that they'll just look at it and get it."

A Kmart spokeswoman said that retailer's test ended in 2006 and that there had been no further rollout. A Walgreens spokeswoman declined comment, saying the chain doesn't discuss such tests for competitive reasons.

Prescription dispensing machines, of sorts, have been in use at least a decade in places such as nursing homes and other pharmacies serving limited groups. Such devices might be stocked with commonly used medicines, said Todd Eury, founder and director of Pharmacy Technology Resource, a consulting business in Cranberry.

In that setting, Mr. Eury said, it makes sense to save staff time that can be better spent caring for patients. The role machines play in retail pharmacies should be handled carefully to make sure the human aspect of health care doesn't get lost, he said.

Jay Adzema, owner of Adzema's Pharmacy on Perry Highway in McCandless, raised that concern, as well. The advent of mail-order services, centralized prescription filling operations and other technologies can put the patient relationship with the pharmacist at risk, he said. "I think a prescription is more than a bottle of pills."

While he had not seen one of the new vending machines, he was waiting to see how the manufacturers have dealt with such issues.

Meanwhile, industry executives also have heard concerns, typical of a self-service introduction, that machines are meant to replace employees. They reject that, saying the goal is to give staff more time to consult with consumers who need it.

Advocates claim the machines also offer safety and convenience advantages. Technology will cut down on prescription mix-ups, said Mr. Blandford. Also, if one person has several prescriptions to pick up, the machines have that on record without forcing an employee to sort through holding bins.

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