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Pill-counter aids service

Shopko's pharmacy taps into technology

By COLIN ATAGI
Daily Tribune Staff

Wisconsin Rapids' Shopko is home to the company's first robotic pill-counter, which is designed to give pharmacists more time to tend to customers.

The Parata Robotic Dispensing System was installed in the Shopko pharmacy about a week ago, and employees say it fills prescriptions in less time than it would take them to do it by hand.

"It frees our time so we can help other customers," said Mike Anderson, pharmacy manager. Before the machine arrived, pharmacists manually counted and poured drugs into bottles that they also had to label, Anderson said. The system saves about 88 percent of that time.

"I would say it took three to four minutes to fill a prescription (before they used the counter)," he said. "Now it takes 30 seconds."

The machine is 26 inches long and 72 inches high. It has 252 compartments, carrying about 225 different types of drugs and about 100 empty prescription vials, Anderson said.

Parata Systems, a company based in North Carolina that specializes in the pharmacy industry, presented the idea to Shopko about six months ago. Parata Systems has been working on the systems since 2001.

"I'm constantly looking at ways to improve our productivity, and Wisconsin Rapids is one of our highest volume pharmacies," Greg Ahmann, vice president of pharmacy services, said. "Our hope is that it helps our work flow to produce prescriptions in a more timely manner and freeing time for pharmacists to consult and talk to customers."

The pill counter prints labels and places them on the empty vials. The labeled vials travel to compartments containing the prescription drugs, where they are filled.

Each compartment has a bar code representing the drug stored inside. An alarm goes off if employees fill a compartment with the wrong drugs.

Workers monitor for any empty compartments. Refills occur anywhere from once or twice an hour to once or twice a day depending on usage, Anderson said.

Some workers are impressed with the machine and find it convenient, pharmacy technician Bill Becker said.

"This thing is fast," Becker said. "It helps a lot and saves time. By the time we get (the prescription) keyed into the computer, this thing is filling it."

Though the machine has strong capabilities, employees still need to help customers, Anderson said.

"We don't intend on replacing people," he said. "The machine is designed to increase customer support levels." Shopko will test the pill-counter for about three months before determining its success rate, Ahmann said.

Other products, he said, are being tested in other Shopko stores in the meantime, including new software, called Work Flow, in east Green Bay and Sheboygan Shopko stores.

"Its intention is to better organize the work flow of the filling process and (it) helps track the location of a prescription that's being filled at any given step," Ahmann said.

Ahmann expects the robotic pill-counter to prove useful and to add to Shopko's service capabilities.

"The other aspect of the system is that there is quality assurance - steps built into the system to prevent dispensing errors," he said. "I'm very optimistic about it. I'm very excited over what we've seen so far. We're still getting it set up."

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