
Running a Better Pharmacy: The Place for Robotics

Sam Kalmanowitz finds ScriptPro's system is another example of how technology has improved his pharmacy practice.

by Will Lockwood

Sam Kalmanowitz is no stranger to innovative technology in his pharmacy. It was 1980 when he installed the QS/1 pharmacy system at Kaye's Pharmacy, his high-volume store in Meriden, Conn. His was also the first pharmacy in New England to install ScriptPro's SP 200 robotic dispensing system and the third pharmacy in the country to use ScriptPro's SP Central pharmacy dispensing management system. Kalmanowitz doesn't do it for bragging rights. "My main objective is accuracy and safety in filling prescriptions," he says. Dispensing accuracy and safety come from highly integrated systems that create a carefully controlled process that can be fully audited and checked.

The SP 200 and SP Central systems intercept the prescription's NDC number as it is transmitted to the printer after processing and adjudication by the QS/1 system. If the prescription is one of up to 200 different tablets or caplets that are housed in the SP 200, the robot automatically fills the vial and prints and applies a label. The prescription is delivered open for a final visual check by the pharmacist against the extensive drug image database available through the SP Central workstations. Kalmanowitz estimates that he fills two-thirds of the

store's prescriptions, excluding nursing-home and home healthcare orders, using the robotic dispensing system. Any item that is not in the SP 200 is routed into the SP Central and filled by hand. However, uniformity of dispensing is maintained because the pharmacist or technician scans the bar code on the manufacturer's bottle and matches this with the drug keyed into the pharmacy system. The SP Central again provides an image of the drug for visual verification and prints out a label for the vial. As Kalmanowitz points out: "What we get is manual filling with all the benefits of the automated computer checks. The safety features are the same whether we fill from the robot or by hand."

The organization provided by automation does not stop with the fill. The SP Central batches all prescriptions and assigns them to 15 to 20 locations, including will call, delivery, narcotics to be held for ID, items to be reconstituted, compounds, nursing home, and more. The pharmacy is equipped with six



Sam Kalmanowitz checks a prescription at the SP Central workstation.

SP Central workstations that allow employees to log into the system with a user-specific ID and find out where a prescription is at any time during the filling process. The system also shows where the prescription was batched. Kalmanowitz has installed three SP Central checkout stations that record the prescription as dispensed in the master record. Again, any employee can use the checkout station after logging in.

The Advantages

There are other advantages to using automation to keep careful track of prescriptions. For example, after receiving an order from a distributor, someone normally has to check the items against any partial fills. But the SP Central saves

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time by allowing a scan of the manufacturer’s packaging to generate a list of all partial fills that are waiting for the new inventory. Kalmanowitz also sets the SP 200 to give him a visual alert when any of the cells reaches a predefined minimum quantity and to produce a daily report of the inventory in the cells. Another beneficial feature Kalmanowitz uses is the ability of the system to track the exact cost per unit of his inventory in real time. Automation and robotic filling has also made it easier to comply with new regulations. “Connecticut has recently begun to require a lot number and expiration date on the label of everything we dispense,” Kalmanowitz says. “We just key it in and SP Central produces one neat label with all the necessary information, including instructions.”

Tangible Benefits

While automation and robotic filling can help to reduce the risk of errors, it can provide other tangible benefits to a pharmacy and its customers. For instance, there’s the time gained by the pharmacy staff. Not only is less time spent counting pills during the work day, but, after the 20 minutes of daily maintenance the robot requires, Kalmanowitz has the SP 200 process the 25 to 40 prescriptions that are waiting on the IVR on a typical morning



Kalmanowitz is pleased with his ScriptPro SP 200 system shown here. He recently upgraded his software to the latest release. At left, Kaye’s Pharmacy in Meriden, Conn.

before the store opens. That keeps customers from waiting. “It is a very efficient use of our time,” says Kalmanowitz. “We are there anyway to open the store, and can do other things while the robot runs.”

Automation will reduce the time that a pharmacist spends filling vials, but Kalmanowitz hasn’t reduced his staff. He has made his SP 200 clearly visible to his customers and encouraged his staff to use the time gained to provide more personal service. “But the real gain has been in safety and efficiency,” says Kalmanowitz. “I figure the machine has cost me \$14.25 an hour to run and that’s cheap when you consider that it doesn’t take vacations, it’s not late, and you don’t have to supervise it. My staff and I have the confidence to spend our time with solving problems and working with customers. The service we can offer

keeps our customers coming back.”

A Good Match

The SP Central and SP 200 have been very reliable so far. Kalmanowitz calls ScriptPro’s on-site training excellent. “Over the course of a week, they spent time with everyone who would use the system and were there when we went live,” he says. “Three months later ScriptPro sent a trainer out unannounced to observe and offer advice.” What little maintenance the staff has been unable to do is handled remotely by dialing into the systems or by a local technician. In all, Kalmanowitz has found that the addition of a robotic filling and workflow system to his operations has only confirmed his experience that technology helps him run a better pharmacy. CT

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