

Refills at Robo-pharmacy

By ROSELEE PAPANDREA
Jacksonville Daily News
July 30th, 2003

Imagine going to a pharmacy, turning in a prescription and walking out with medication in less than 15 minutes.

It's possible at Doctors Park Pharmacy on Memorial Drive because of a robotic prescription dispensing system that does the work of three pharmacy technicians and reduces errors.

While most customers don't have any idea there is a robot behind the scenes doing about 54 percent of the work, pharmacist Kimberly Sullivan knows it's improved production and it's freed her up to concentrate on the customer.

"The biggest thing for me is that I have so much time to talk to patients," she said. "Patients who have questions no longer have to wait."

And Kimberly Sullivan, who is the only pharmacist at the store, doesn't have to rush through those discussions in order to keep up with the prescription schedule because the \$200,000 ScriptPro system is reducing the usual eight steps necessary to fill an order down to one.

The robot consists of a flat-screen computer, a specialized shelving system, a robotic arm, a conveyor belt and several checks and balances to make sure the correct medication has been bottled, said Vern Sullivan, a pharmacy technician.

When a prescription comes in, the technician enters the information into the computer. The robot sorts through the prescriptions and determines which ones it can fill. There are about 183 different medications loaded into containers in the machine. Really large capsules or ones that are too powdery can't be used in the system, Vern Sullivan said.

If the robot can fill it, it will select a bottle - three different sizes are available - and a robotic arm will carry the bottle to the appropriate container. A two-laser system then counts the drug and dispenses it into the bottle. When the bottle is filled, it is carried to a conveyor belt where a label is attached.

Once the tech has the bottle in hand, a barcode on the label is scanned to verify it is the correct medication.

An enlarged photo of the pill or capsule appears on the computer screen so the technician can verify that the pill in the bottle is the same as what is on the screen.

The label on the bottle also includes a drawing of the pill and a description, including the color and any markings, for the customer, Vern Sullivan said.

"At top speed, this will do 100 prescriptions an hour all by itself," Vern Sullivan said. "One pharmacy technician can do 20 to 30 prescriptions an hour and they would be working really hard. But like with any robotic unit, it's never going to call in sick. It's never going to complain. It's never going to be tired."

Since the robot was installed June 30, the pharmacy has experienced a 15 percent increase in volume, even though June and July are typically the slowest months because a lot of people go on vacation, Kimberly Sullivan said.



Don Bryan/Daily News

Ready to go: Bins filled with prescription medicines are neatly stacked to be accessed by a robotic arm for dispensing.

"It now takes us less than 15 minutes to fill a prescription given there are no insurance problems," Kimberly Sullivan said.

The pharmacy has also added flavor - 42 flavors to be exact - to its menu of options, and it keeps customers, especially those with kids, coming back for more.

Gone are the days when cough medicine was only available in cherry or orange flavors. For \$2.99 per prescription, Flavor Rx enables the pharmacy to add flavor, such as cotton candy, chocolate covered cherry, banana cream pie, raspberry or butterscotch, to any liquid medication.

"I've had parents come in and say that kids actually ask for their medication because it tastes so good," Vern Sullivan said.

Contact Roselee Papandrea at rpapandrea@jdnews.com or at 353-1171, Ext. 238.