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Pharmacists get automated help

Robotic system faster, more accurate than humans in filling prescriptions

The new pharmacy tech behind the counter at Apple Discount Drugs in Clinton doesn't ever ask for a lunch break.

It runs on electricity.

Last week, 13-year-old Apple Discount Drugs became the first independent pharmacy in Tennessee to begin using the ScriptPro robot, which counts pills and fills and labels bottles for the pharmacy's employees, freeing them up to spend more time talking with patients.

"We wanted to be cutting edge," said pharmacist Karen Bright, who with husband pharmacist Tom Bright owns Apple. "Most people have a prescription card and pay \$5 to \$10 wherever they go, so service is what makes the difference. The robot gives us time to spend with someone, talking about the real issue, which is their health."

The robot scans barcodes for the pharmacy's top 200 prescriptions in pill or capsule form, finding the pill in a drawer and filling up to 100 bottles an hour. It labels the bottles and deposits them on a conveyor belt, which runs to a pharmacist or pharmacy technician, who scans them into a computer. Drug information and a picture of the pill appear on the screen so a human can check that the right medication is in the bottle.

The system is more accurate and less time-consuming than having humans manually fill prescriptions, said Ted Lischer, national sales manager for Kansas-based ScriptPro.

Lischer said since technicians began installing the robot in pharmacies nationwide more than three years ago, they've seen patient wait time drop from more than 40 minutes to as little as 10 minutes in some pharmacies.

"When people have been to the doctor, they don't feel well, and they don't want to have to wait for their prescription," Karen Bright said.

Customers have embraced new technology at this small drugstore where pharmacists know most customers by name -- and sometimes get calls from them at home at 7:30 a.m.

"This is new, knowing there's a robot back there filling the prescriptions," said Teresa Bumpus, who said she drives a distance to shop at Apple, "but I trust both pharmacists here, and if they have a robot here, they considered it a long time."

The robots aren't new to East Tennessee; Rite Aid pharmacies in several towns near Knoxville use them. The Loudon Rite-Aid was the first, installing the robot about 18 months ago; others have had them about six months.

Store manager Rhonda Mantooth said the robot's speed and accuracy is great. "I love it," Mantooth said. "A tech can be doing something else while that's doing her job. We haven't had any problems."

The robot can dial up ScriptPro's 24-hour "Robot Doctor" if there is a problem, Karen Bright said. So far, Apple has experienced only "quirks," she said. It had problems with a blood pressure medication, Hyzaar, possibly because of the pill's unusual shape, and Tom Bright said dust from some pills could occasionally obscure the barcode, which must then be wiped off.

East Tennessee Discount Drugs in Lenoir City plans to get a ScriptPro robot by Sept. 1, said pharmacy director Joe Nowell.

"We have a significant volume of prescriptions to fill on a daily basis in a finite period of time," Nowell said. "You can only go so fast without hurting somebody or making a mistake. The accuracy of this machine is phenomenal. It can theoretically reduce the risk of potential errors by 60 to 80 percent."

Expect to see the robots, which can fill up to 75 percent of a pharmacy's prescriptions, behind most pharmacy counters within two to four years, said Jeff Joyce, secretary/treasurer of the Tennessee Pharmacy Coalition, which represents 310 independent pharmacies in the Southeast. "Over the next few years, there will be an increase in the number of prescriptions written by prescribers and filled by pharmacists," Joyce said. "The automation will assist the pharmacist in providing quality dispensing."

Doctors benefit when pharmacists have more time to spend with patients, Karen Bright said. "Doctors want the patients to be more compliant, and a patient's more compliant if they understand more about their medication," she said, "what it's for, what it does, what to do, what to eat or drink or avoid."