

Robot Fred Fills in at Lincoln Pharmacy

By JIM SHAMP

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DURHAM -- Fred Zintz is the newest recruit at the Lincoln Community Health Center pharmacy. And he's already drawing rave reviews from his fellow staff members.

Since joining the 14 pharmacists, technicians and clerks at Lincoln's busy pharmacy in November, he's proven to be a tireless worker. He's been completely accurate in dispensing drugs to the health center's patients, seldom grumpy and so completely driven that he takes no coffee or restroom breaks.

It helps that Fred is a glorified vending machine -- emphasis on glorified. He's believed to be the first of his kind installed in a community health clinic pharmacy in the United States.

"I think for a pharmacy meeting the needs of the under-served community, this is very progressive," said David Work, executive director of the N.C. Board of Pharmacy. "Most operations doing this kind of community health service are primitive. I think the folks at Lincoln deserve a commendation for putting the money into it. These systems are not inexpensive, but in the long run they pay off."

Fred is a metal cabinet, about the size of three large refrigerators side-by-side, stacked with trays, or "cells," of pills behind glass doors. An arm sweeps back and forth behind the glass doors, holding various sizes of pill bottles beneath computerized pill-counting chutes, moving quickly to each of 200 different cells.

Each cell contains a bulk supply of a different medication in tablet or capsule form.

Fred not only automates the repetitive, manual dispensing tasks most subject to human error, filling up to 100 prescriptions an hour. He also prints and applies the labels and delivers uncapped vials to the human staff for final inspection.

Photographs of each drug in Fred's cells flash on the screen as the human staffers swipe a barcode from the label, permitting a final visual cross-check to ensure what's in the bottle is what's been prescribed. Bar-code scanning continues at multiple points in the dispensing process.

Fred is the offspring of ScriptPro, a robotics firm headquartered in Mission, Kan. And now that he's ensconced in Durham at one of the largest community health centers in the nation, he's getting a mate to help make his life complete.

Since Fred is limited to tablet and capsule dispensing, he's being married this week to his soul mate, ScriptPro's SP Central, which permits dispensing of other

forms of medications such as liquids and inhalers. The new family also includes pharmacist workstations, special "checkpoints" for ensuring safety, and related gear.

"Fred Zintz is a good friend to us. He's definitely going to revolutionize the way we practice pharmacy," said Lincoln's pharmacy supervisor Lynn Robbins.

Robbins, a 25-year Lincoln veteran and a key organizer of the center's increasingly popular fund-raising road race, gave Fred Zintz its name -- an extension of a family joke originated by her octogenarian father.

"My father made this name up," she explained. "He has traveled all over the world. He's the most wonderfully outgoing man you'd ever hope to meet. We used to travel with him and everywhere we'd go, he'd go up and greet some stranger saying, 'Fred. Fred Zintz! How are you?' I remember once, in France, we saw my father sitting on a bench, talking to this man, even though my dad doesn't know a word of French! He's a stranger to no one."

The "Fred" stories seemed to fit the new pharmacy robot at Lincoln. So the name has stuck. "Now when we talk about one of the drugs dispensed by this robot, we say, 'It's a Fred drug,'" said Robbins.

Several others have been installed around North Carolina, mostly in Kerr Drugs retail pharmacies. Most pharmacists seem to wind up naming their ScriptPro robots, said Robbins.

Leslie Bayer, a ScriptPro spokeswoman, said some 2,000 of the robots, officially named the SP 200 Robotic Cabinet, have been installed during the past four years the devices have been on the market. And the number grows significantly each year, she said.

"Drug therapies have improved so much there's an ever-higher demand for prescriptions," said Bayer. "Add to that the fact that baby boomers are getting older and you have an even greater need for drugs. And the nationwide pharmacist shortage is a key part of this demand for these robots."

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