

# Electronic helper dispensing drugs, good service at Wilson Pharmacy

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There was only a slight hum as the robotic arm glided up the cabinet, counted out the pills and then sent the filled bottle along a conveyor belt to an awaiting pharmacy technician.

"It's amazing," Wilson Pharmacy Customer Representative Shirley Shepherd said standing behind the counter.

The longest serving employee at the pharmacy, Shepherd said the robotic prescription filler is like nothing she has ever seen since coming to work at the pharmacy in 1957.

"That's the only word for it. Amazing. People will just stand here and say, 'What is that?' " the woman said.

Visible just behind the counter at Wilson Pharmacy, 525 State of Franklin Road, the robot has been giving a hand to pharmacists and technicians for the last 18 months.

"This counts about 65 percent of all our capsules and tablets," Assistant Pharmacy Director Steve Lane said.

In a special cabinet built as part of the machine, 185 different medications are divided into a wall of plastic containers. The robot then monitors the pharmacy's computer system and when a prescription is ordered of one of the medications in the closet, it sets to work.

With the size of each pill logged into its memory, the robot is able to take the amount of medication ordered and decide how large a vial is needed. Gliding along a moving bar, a small clamp picks out the bottle, moves up to the appropriate container and then using a type of spinning device, starts counting out pills. Each container is labeled with a barcode and the clamp mechanism has a computer that checks the medication to make sure the right type is being chosen.

"There's a little electric eye that counts the pills," Lane said.

Once filled, the arm sets the full yet open bottle on the conveyor, labels it and runs it over to the technician. Here, a monitor pulls up an enlarged image of the type of medication ordered.

If the pills inside the bottle don't match the picture on the screen, the technician knows something went wrong.

That's never happened, Lane said.

"We've had it for a year and a half, and it's never made a mistake," he said.

Because of the numerous checks and balances in the machine, Lane said he is comfortable with the robot's accuracy and pleased with the amount of time it saves.

These medication robots are still rare and don't expect to find them at the corner pharmacy. But their importance means more than just speedier service, Lane said. It means pharmacists can do their real job by talking to patients and not just counting capsules.

"The main reason we bought this was so much of our time was taken up counting," he said. "We feel it is very important the pharmacist is very focused on educating patients."

Talking about rising medical costs, Lane said many problems can be avoided if people take the opportunity each time they walk into the pharmacy to ask questions and make sure what they are taking is right for them.

"It just makes good, old-fashioned sense," the pharmacist said.

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