



'ATM' for prescription drugs makes debut

ScriptCenter, the Asteres dispenser of prescription drugs, could be coming to a pharmacy near you.

June 21, 2005: 4:45 PM EDT

By Aaron Smith, CNN/Money staff writer

NEW YORK (CNN/Money) - In December 2002, Linda Pinney, founder and chief business officer of Asteres Inc., had an epiphany while waiting in line at a pharmacy in Del Mar, Calif.

"I was standing in line thinking there's got to be another way," said Pinney, who was filling a prescription for a drug to treat her Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. "Make an ADHD person wait in line to pick up a prescription and they're going to come up with a solution."

Thus was born the ScriptCenter, an ATM-style device that dispenses drugs instead of cash.

Three years after Pinney's restless waiting got her thinking, the first ScriptCenter was installed in that very same Del Mar pharmacy, a member of the Longs Drug Stores chain.

"We're always looking for ways to serve our customers, and it seems as though customers are very time constrained," said [Longs Drug Stores](#) (down \$0.17 to \$43.41, [Research](#)) spokeswoman Phyllis Proffer. "This is a great example of how we can use technology to save the customers' time."

For the last six months, the first ScriptCenter has served as a test device, delivering prescription refills for hundreds of patients. The California Board of Pharmacy granted a tentative approval for the machine, reserving the right to withdraw it any time. But so far there haven't been any problems, according to the board.

"There seems to be some controversy about the machines," said Patricia Harris, executive officer for the California Board of Pharmacy. "There is concern from the pharmacy profession that you're losing that contact with the patients when they're receiving pharmaceuticals from the machine."

But Harris says the machines are intended to speed up a process, not replace pharmacists. "You still have to go through your checks and balances to make sure it's a legitimate prescription up front," she said. "We see no issues from it, from a staff perspective."

"There is a very strict authentication process to use the machine," said Pinney, who considers it more secure than receiving prescription drugs in the mail.



FROM: ASTERES.COM

To guard against fraud, patients use identification cards or passwords to access the drugs and the machines take security photographs of the transactions, like with ATMs.

States start approving

Asteres, a privately-held Del Mar-based company, plans to install two more machines at San Diego pharmacies this month and another machine in San Francisco. In addition to Longs Drug Stores, [Safeway Inc.](#) (up \$0.93 to \$24.47, [Research](#)) has agreed to host the ScriptCenters at California locations.

Meanwhile, the Virginia Board of Pharmacy has also granted tentative approval to the ScriptCenter, and one of the machines is in the process of being set up at an Giant Food store in Reston, Va. owned by Ahold USA.

"It's going to be one store and approved for refills only," said Ralph Orr, deputy executive director for the Virginia Board of Pharmacy, "to allow the chance for the technology to be looked at."

The Hawaii Board of Pharmacy on Friday became the first state board to approve the ScriptCenters for accepting new prescriptions, in addition to refills, said Pinney. Also, Asteres has begun the regulatory process in about a half dozen other states.

Some of the ScriptCenters are located inside 24-hour stores. In California and Virginia, the machines can be used even when the pharmacies are closed, Pinney said. Hawaii waived that right by allowing ScriptCenters to accept new prescriptions.

Pinney isn't worried about thieves walking off with drug-laden ScriptCenters.

"The ScriptCenter weighs 1,300 pounds when loaded," said Pinney. "It is drilled down through the cement. I don't think it's going anywhere." ■