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## Pharmacy robot Automated kiosk dispenses refills

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Consumers have long been getting everything from cash to airline tickets from automated machines. Now add prescription drugs to the list.

Longs Drug Store Corp. will be the first Northern California retailer to install an ATM-style kiosk that dispenses drugs. Safeway Inc. has also received state approval for drug kiosks. Requests from Walgreens and White Cross Pharmacy in San Diego are pending.

These machines, which had their California premiere in San Diego late last year, spit out prepackaged refills. They are being touted as an alternative to waiting while a pharmacist fills a prescription.

Pharmacies and manufacturers of the devices believe that growing acceptance of electronic vending systems for other items will help people feel comfortable getting drugs from a machine.

Longs, which has been testing a kiosk in a San Diego store, plans to introduce the device in its pharmacy on South California Boulevard in Walnut Creek within the next week or two.

The company, which also is headquartered in Walnut Creek, is rolling out the technology cautiously. Longs believes the kiosks will let pharmacists spend more time with patients, but it wants to test the devices thoroughly.

"We have an obligation to make sure the technology is secure and reliable," said spokeswoman Phyllis Proffer. "If the installation goes well and the tests go well, we will allow people to use it."

Some pharmacists are unhappy about the prospect of customers buying their drugs from a machine. They fear kiosks will reduce their contact with patients, further eroding relationships already hurt by such trends as mail-order distribution and online drug sales.

Pharmacists also see the devices as potential threats to their jobs, similar to robotic dispensers that have replaced human hands putting medication into containers.

A group of independent California pharmacists filed a lawsuit in April against the state Board of Pharmacy, accusing it of failing to assess the technology sufficiently before waiving rules that require a pharmacist be present while drugs are being dispensed.

"What the chains want to do is reduce costs. We need more pharmacists and more counseling, versus more robots and machines," said Fred Mayer, head of the Pharmacy Defense Fund, a San Rafael legal foundation that filed the suit.

Mayer said the lack of pharmacist involvement could lead to adverse reactions to medications. And, he warned, customers -- especially seniors could be robbed of their drugs, depending on where pharmacies locate machines.

The machines conceivably could be used to replace human workers, of course. For its part, Longs has no plans to cut pharmacists or clerical staff. The company views the kiosks as a way to provide greater convenience, Proffer said.

The two manufacturers of the ATM-style kiosks -- Asteres Inc. of Del Mar and Distributed Delivery Networks Corp. of San Marcos, both in San Diego County -- say the pharmacists are misinterpreting the way retailers will use the machines.

The devices don't actually fill prescriptions. Instead, they hold prescriptions that have been filled by pharmacists until customers can pick them up.

Consumers typically must register to use kiosks. After logging on with a password and user name, the customer pays with a credit or debit card and receives the order.

"It's just another checkout lane. It's like a clerk with the inventory in it. If it's a refill prescription, such as birth control, and you just don't want to stand in line, that's what it's there for," said Linda Pinney, founder of Asteres, which makes the ScriptCenter, the device that Longs and Walgreens are using.

Distributed Delivery Chief Executive Officer William Holmes said the machines might actually improve interactions between pharmacists and patients, and reduce medication errors.

"By getting the people out of line that don't need or want a consultation, you'll increase the face time with the people who need that," he said.

The Asteres and DDN machines are similar and are being introduced at roughly the same time. Asteres filed a lawsuit last year against DDN and Holmes, accusing them of misappropriating trade secrets, an accusation DDN denies. A trial is set for September.

DDN's product, the Automated Pharmacy Machine, has been tested by White Cross Pharmacy in San Diego. Holmes said the company plans to roll out its devices with Kmart Corp. and Duane Reade in New York.

Holmes said DDN's units cost about \$55,000 each, and the company is planning to introduce a smaller-capacity version that would run about \$39,000. Asteres' Pinney said ScriptCenter, a 1,300-pound machine that can hold up to 500 prescriptions, costs about \$75,000.

The California Board of Pharmacy is scheduled to review requests for the machines by Walgreens and White Cross at its meeting next week.

The board's executive director, Patricia Harris, said she has confidence in the regulations the board has set for the machines. They include limiting their use to refills and requiring them to be placed in close proximity to a pharmacy.

"The board would not have passed or approved the waiver if we felt it impacted patient safety," she said.

Researchers at UC San Diego are planning to study the machines' effect on consumers and pharmacies, Harris said. The medical center has applied for a waiver to install a kiosk in its outpatient pharmacy.

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