

The Sun-Herald

Business

July 10, 2005

Medication by vending machine

By Daniel Dasey
CONSUMER REPORTER

AUSTRALIA

Pharmacists have expressed interest in vending machines that would allow consumers to pick up prescription drugs out of hours.

The Pharmaceutical Society of Australia last week said the ATM-style machines, gaining popularity in the US, could have a role in Australia for stable patients on regular medication.

But it stressed the idea would have to be thoroughly investigated and strictly policed.

PSA national president Brian Grogan said: "There are advantages if a pharmacy doesn't open after hours and has one of these machines to provide a service to patients. But there would have to be some pretty strict controls."

Vending machine operators last week expressed interest in the idea and pharmacy industry analysts believe it may be only a matter of time before it is tried here.

But the Registrar of the Pharmacy Board of NSW thought there would be significant obstacles to introducing the devices.

Three American states opened the way for electronic drug dispensers to go into use this year, allowing the public out-of-hours access to common prescription medicines and cutting costs.

US automation company Asteres has been a pioneer for the chemist vending machines with its ScriptCenter now being used in California and Virginia and approved for use in Hawaii.

Consumers in Hawaii will be able to get a new prescription as well as repeats. A consumer phones ahead to order a prescription, which the pharmacist fills and places into the vending machine. The consumer picks up the prescription later, keying in a password or code.

Dispensed drugs can include asthma and blood pressure medications and contraceptive pills.

Mr. Grogan said there were disadvantages in that patients would lose contact with pharmacists who could monitor conditions. But he said for regular repeat prescriptions, where the patient was stable, there could be advantages.

Registrar of the Pharmacy Board of NSW Kym Ayscough said there would be administrative and ethical considerations.

To claim their payment for issuing many medicines under the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme pharmacists must obtain a patient's signature.

There are also requirements to provide appropriate advice and counseling to people receiving prescriptions.