

## ATM-style machine cures Rx waits

### 2 local companies go for refill market

By Sarah Skidmore

UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

There are lines at the dry cleaner, the grocery store and the post office. But when you get to the drugstore, two local companies want you to be able to cut ahead.

Asteres and Distributed Delivery Networks Corp. have created ATM-style machines for prescription drugs.

In less than a minute, patients can log in, pay up and get out with a refill. Clients still go to the counter for first-time prescriptions, to discuss a drug's safety and use.

"The people who have to pick up the same prescription every month want to run in, get it and not have to wait behind six people who might need more assistance," said Linda Pinney, founder of Asteres, a Del Mar company.

Asteres debuted its device at a Del Mar Longs Drug Store in January. The big blue machine, which is about the size of a big fridge, is next to the traditional drug counter line and has by now filled more than 1,200 prescriptions.

"It is awesome, I'm really a proponent of it," Del Mar resident Loretta Morris said after using the machine.

Morris used to work long hours as a money manager and said it was a hassle to get to Longs during pharmacy hours. She switched her prescriptions to a 24-hour store farther away, but returned to Longs after the machine arrived.

The automated system is free and available even when the pharmacy is closed, an appeal for retail drugstores, which are trying to diversify their pharmacy business in the face of growing mail-order and online competition.

In the past year, Longs has also extended its hours and added home delivery service to improve its pharmacy services.

"We're always looking for new ways to serve our customers," Longs spokeswoman Phyllis Proffer said. "Times are changing; customers are time-constrained."



Other pharmacies are interested in the new tool. Safeway Inc., which owns Vons pharmacies, plans to install the Asteres devices. And Asteres said it is talking with Stop & Shop Co., the Department of Defense and the University of California San Diego about possible installments.

Distributed Delivery Networks Corp., a San Marcos company, produces a similar device but declined to disclose where it is being used or future plans. But chief executive Bill Holmes said one machine is in use and the company has purchase orders either in hand or pending with several retailers.

A handful of companies provide machines that deliver medication in physicians' offices and medical clinics.

But a retail machine is a new phenomenon and has attracted attention, good and bad, from pharmacists.

Some pharmacists say it improves efficiency for patients and staff, creating more time for patients who need their help. This issue has become particularly important because of a shortage of pharmacists.

But others are leery, saying the machine could allow some patients with potential issues to slip through unnoticed.

Asteres said the device has numerous safeguards in place. Pharmacists still fill the prescription, and the machine reroutes a patient to the counter when a problem arises, such as a potential drug interaction.

Distributed Delivery's Holmes said the machine provides a safer alternative to some other delivery methods, such as mail order, that he said have more opportunity for human error.

Both companies are familiar with drug delivery issues.

Several Asteres employees used to work for Pyxis, a local company that develops large-scale medication delivery systems, like those used in hospitals. Holmes is also a former Pyxis employee.

"I think the biggest concern is it's something new, said Patricia Harris, executive officer for the California Board of Pharmacy. "There were some reservations."

UCSD is developing a formal study of the delivery systems.

"Right now it is used as a mechanism to pick up refills, but who knows what the future will bring," said Chuck Daniels, associate dean for clinical affairs at the Skaggs School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences at UCSD.

"We think there is a great opportunity to look at this," Daniels said. "This is a technology that in 2005 people feel comfortable with, whereas five years ago they might not have felt good about it." ■