

New Technology Helps Pharmacists Help Patients

Have you ever been frustrated by a long wait to have your prescription filled? Have you ever looked at the prescription the doctor just handed to you and wondered how your pharmacist will ever be able to decipher the handwriting? Community pharmacies are taking steps to make both situations even less common.

The advent of robotic and information technologies has had a profound impact on every industry and community pharmacy is no exception. Pharmacies are beginning to embrace robotics, e-scripts and web-enabled patient databases to tackle common problems such as deciphering physicians' penmanship, dealing with pill-counting trays, and waiting to confirm prescriptions for traveling patients.

Robotics

Robotic prescription dispensing systems are providing a much needed solution for an industry where time is a luxury and space inside stores is at a premium. A variety of manufacturers have introduced a series of affordable, automated technologies that are being used in many community pharmacies. Most automated pill-dispensing robots take up roughly the same area as a normal shelving unit. Robots can be run 24 hours a day, freeing staff from the mundane tasks of counting and filling prescription bottles.

Automation is about more than saving time and optimizing space. The safety enhancement features add to its attraction. It is generally recommended that a pharmacist fill no more than 15 prescriptions an hour. Medication errors occur

most frequently at three different points in the prescription process: when physicians make the initial order, when the pharmacy fills the prescription and when the medication is administered. When coupled with signature capture technology, automation enables pharmacists to keep a closer track of orders, avoiding duplication and increasing the cross-application of safety standards throughout the process.

Bar code technology is also typically used in conjunction with robotics to ensure accuracy and quality control throughout the distribution process. The scanning of bar codes prevents the human error that can occur when medications are manually picked out of bins. Using automated systems, pharmacists can manage the dispensing process from prescription entry to approval of the finished product.

Increasing automation is allowing pharmacists to spend more time to focus on complicated prescriptions, reviewing patient profiles, and providing patient counseling.

E-Scripts

Much of a pharmacist's workday can be spent on the phone receiving and clarifying prescriptions. This will become a more significant strain as the demand for prescriptions increases in response to the aging population.

As a result, paperless prescriptions are making their mark on the industry. Many pharmacies have adopted technology that allows doctors to "call in" prescriptions in less than 30 seconds using an Internet connection, handheld PC or cell phone. Physicians are also expressing a stronger

interest in electronic prescribing as they become increasingly aware of the known efficiencies and safety factors, as well as the emphasis placed on the process by Medicare and Medicaid.

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services has recently proposed regulations for the use of electronic prescriptions in conjunction with the new Medicare drug benefit that takes effect in January 2006. Standards are expected to spur the use of e-prescribing throughout the nation's healthcare system.

E-script technology enables pharmacists to spend more time counseling patients instead of answering questions over the phone and processing prescriptions.

Patient Databases

Finally, patient databases allow druggists to capture, store, analyze and archive information in compliance with government privacy requirements. More and more pharmacists are using information technology networks that make it easier to deal with traveling patients to get their prescriptions.

These networks can not only capture a patient's medical history at the point of care, but also permit geographically dispersed medical staff, pharmacists, and others controlled, anytime, anywhere access to the appropriate patient information. This permits pharmacists to focus on dispensing medication, conferring with caregivers and patients, as well as managing their own businesses in a more effective, cost-efficient manner.

Information technology and robotics will continue to change pharmacy and make it even more efficient. □

Ask Your Family Pharmacist®