

BUSINESS

A cure for the busy patient?

As in-store clinics' popularity grows, so do concerns about care

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Shoppers aren't the only ones to notice the walk-in health clinics popping up in supermarkets and other stores.

Established medical providers are also paying attention to this new niche in the health care industry, and their reactions range from collaboration to caution.

The clinics promote themselves as a convenient and affordable alternative to hospital emergency rooms and doctors' offices. They're staffed mainly by nurse practitioners and physician assistants and treat minor problems such as sinus infections and strep throat.

The clinics' extended hours are proving popular with people who want immediate care at night or on weekends. Most medical services cost less than \$50, about half of what an urgent-care clinic in a strip shopping center typically charges.

MedBasics, which opened Dallas' first in-store health clinics at two Carnival supermarkets last year, has reached a collaboration agreement with one of Dallas' oldest health care organizations, Baylor Health Care System.

MedBasics staff will refer patients requiring more extensive care to Baylor-affiliated doctors, while Baylor will suggest MedBasics clinics to patients who use its emergency departments for minor problems.

Baylor will also help MedBasics find physicians to supervise the nurse practitioners and physician assistants in the company's future clinics, said Phil Weinman, Baylor's vice president of strategy and business development.

MedBasics chairman and chief executive Brian Jones said he proposed the collaboration to Baylor officials.

"I view my company's relationship with the medical community as complementary, not competitive," he said. "More than half of our patients don't have a doctor. Our goal is to help them find one. We don't intend to be their medical home."

Mr. Weinman said the health care system agreed to the affiliation with the Dallas start-up company because it will benefit consumers.

"Both of us want our patients to receive the right kind of care at the right location," he said.

MedBasics, which changed its name from MedXpress in December, has averaged 25 patients per day at each of its two clinics. The company plans to open two more clinics in Carnival stores by summer and three others in the area later this year.

MedBasics remains the only operator of clinics in Dallas stores. Several other companies have opened 19 clinics in drugstores, discount centers or supermarkets in Austin, Houston and San Antonio.

Nationally, the Convenient Care Association, the industry's trade group, projects the number of in-store clinics will double from today's 300 by year's end.

Association executive director Tine Hansen-Turton said Texas has been slow to attract retail clinics because it has the toughest rules for physician oversight in the country.

Texas is the only state to require that a physician be at a clinic 20 percent of the time to review patient charts and offer guidance, she said. Many states simply require a clinic's nurse practitioners and physician assistants to consult with a doctor.

Texas' rules make it harder for in-store clinics to recruit primary-care doctors, who are already in short supply, Ms. Hansen-Turton said.

State Rep. Rob Orr has filed legislation to free physicians from the on-site requirement and permit them to consult by phone and check patient records online. The bill also would let them supervise more nurse practitioners or physician assistants.

"We should be working to keep health care costs down," the Burleson Republican said. "These clinics aren't a cure-all, but why should people pay \$300 to treat a minor problem at an emergency room when they could go to a clinic?"

The Texas Medical Association opposes the legislation because it believes the proposed regulatory changes would compromise patient care.

"We're not against retail clinics per se, but there's a huge potential for abuse," said the association's president, Dr. Ladon Homer of Fort Worth. "Physician oversight is an absolute necessity, and this bill would only water that down."

Mr. Orr said other states with less stringent rules haven't encountered any serious problems with physician oversight.

"These clinics fit nicely into the trend of consumer-driven health care," he said. "They post their prices on the wall for everyone to see."

Dr. Homer isn't persuaded by the lawmaker's arguments.

"We shouldn't sacrifice quality for Wal-Mart pricing," he said. "Convenient care shouldn't be lower-quality care."