

Posted on Mon, Oct. 23, 2006

Doc in a box

Health clinics specializing in low-cost, limited service open in North Texas supermarkets

TERESA McUSIC
The Savvy Consumer

Imagine getting your cholesterol screened while you pick out your weekly produce one Saturday. Or having a sore throat looked at after work, then buying soup to take home for dinner.

That's the idea behind MedXpress, which opened its first retail health clinic at a Carnival grocery store in Dallas this year and plans 24 more in the Metroplex at Carnival or Minyard stores. The clinics specialize in low-cost, limited service.

Poul Heilmann, Minyard's senior vice president for strategy and marketing, said Tarrant County will have MedXpress clinics by the end of the year, but he would not be more specific.

"We saw it as a natural extension to our pharmacy," Heilmann said. "We've been observing the trend around the country, and then MedXpress contacted us."

The Minyard clinics are part of a new medical-provider model targeted at patients without insurance or with high-deductible plans, as well as those looking for more convenient hours without making appointments.

About 200 store clinics are operating nationally, most of them in major retailers such as Wal-Mart, Target and CVS. But recent announcements by the chains say the clinics will grow well into the thousands in the next few years.

For now, none of the major chains that was contacted have plans for the Metroplex, except for MedXpress.

"We think D-FW is a tremendous market for this concept," said Brian K. Jones, CEO of Dallas-based MedXpress. "D-FW is the fifth-largest market in the country, and we expect it will become attractive to our competition."

This is the second medical provider in which Jones and his brother, Stephen, started using nurse practitioners and physician assistants to deliver routine medical services. The two are also founders of MedWay, an urgent-care and occupational medical provider for 2,000 employers in the area.

Jones said the company plans to open 500 MedXpress clinics nationwide by 2010.

For consumers, the clinics can offer considerable savings for treatment of minor ailments, checkups and immunizations. Most treatments cost \$49 to \$59; adult physicals including lab tests cost \$199.

"A lot of our patients are looking for alternatives," said Lisa Taylor, a family nurse practitioner with a doctorate in nursing, who serves as corporate director of clinical operations at MedXpress. "We had one woman who needed lab work done every three months, and she asked us how much it would cost. When we told her \$47, she was almost in tears. It was costing her \$280 at her doctors for the exact same lab."

The American Medical Association and the Texas Medical Association have offered cautionary approval of the retail clinics.

"Our greatest concern is the welfare of our patients," said Dr. Ladon Homer, a Fort Worth pathologist and president of the TMA. "We want to make absolutely sure these clinics are monitored and have high-quality care."

At the same time, Homer acknowledged that 5.5 million people in the state do not have health insurance and that 65 percent of the uninsured are working.

"This may be a small piece of a solution," he said. "But we do not consider this a substitution for a medical home."

Jones said the clinics aren't trying to compete with doctors.

"We're here to complement their practice, not to replace them," Jones said.

Most retail clinics use nurse practitioners and physician assistants to tend to patients under a doctor's supervision. The Texas State Board of Medical Examiners requires any clinic not in a rural setting to have a doctor on site 20 percent of the time.

Jones said the MedXpress clinics adhere to the state's medical-practice guidelines, as well as recommendations from the American Academy of Family Physicians and the AMA. In June, the AMA came out with nine principles for suggested care in these settings.

"For patients to receive optimal care, store-based health clinics should provide a limited and well-defined list of healthcare services and take steps to ensure continuity of care with a physician in the local community," Dr. Rebecca J. Patchin, an AMA board member, said in a statement. "Patients should be clearly informed of the qualifications of the staff providing care, as well as any limitation in the types of illnesses that can be diagnosed and treated at the clinic."

Patients needing care beyond what can be provided at the clinic, or those requiring a follow-up visit, should be referred to a physician, she added.

Most patients who have come to the MedXpress in south Dallas do not have a primary-care provider, Taylor said.

"We help them get into the system and educate them to get a primary-care provider," she said.

One big savings that is in the medical model comes through much less paperwork, Taylor said.

"The billing process will drive up the cost," said Taylor, who previously owned a rural health clinic. "We are being as cost-effective as we can and pass it on to the consumer."

IN THE KNOW

When to go the hospital ER

Difficulty breathing, shortness of breath

Chest or upper abdominal pain or pressure

Fainting, sudden dizziness, weakness

Changes in vision

Confusion or changes in mental status

Any sudden or severe pain

Uncontrolled bleeding

Severe or persistent vomiting or diarrhea

Coughing or vomiting blood

Suicidal feelings

Difficulty speaking

Shortness of breath

Unusual abdominal pain

SOURCE: American College of Emergency Physicians

RETAIL HEALTH-CLINIC SERVICES

Common ailments treated: Minor cuts; sprains; pink eye; mono; headaches; allergies; bronchitis; flu; respiratory, ear and sinus infections; strep throat; bladder infections; nausea and vomiting; athlete's foot.

Lab testing offered: blood counts, liver and kidney function, rheumatoid arthritis, hepatitis C, prostate specific antigen, diabetes testing, allergy screening, cholesterol profile, glucose.

Wellness services offered: Sports and school physicals, routine male and female physicals, vaccinations, weight-management and nutrition programs.

SOURCE: MedXpress

Teresa McUsic's column appears on Mondays and Fridays. Reach her at tmcusic@savvyconsumer.net.