

A quicker way to get your medications

A Hatboro doctor is co-founder of a firm that sells prescription vending machines to doctors' offices.

In our no-wait world, people don't have time to get sick.

For those with no choice, a trip to the pharmacy can add time, frustration and more cost to the suffering.

But a company in Blue Bell has helped make buying medication as easy as pressing a button ... well, almost.

QuiqMeds, formed in 2004, has been leasing 6-foot tall, 600-pound vending-style machines to health care providers so they can provide prescriptions — mostly generics — to patients at the doctor's office.

About 100 providers in more than 20 practices use the system regionally, some as far as Pittsburgh. Doctors in Connecticut and Florida will be using the QuiqMeds system soon.

Co-founder Dr. James Judd, the company's chief medical officer, has been using the machine in his practice at Hatboro Medical Associates for 2 ½ years.

Judd says the convenience factor is only part of the benefit to QuiqMeds.

"About eight years ago I noticed a lot of senior citizens coming in and they either had high co-pays or they had lost their coverage. So I decided to put in a system to give generic drugs to my patients at a price that was just enough to cover the overhead," explained Judd.

Although 45 states, including Pennsylvania, allow doctors to dispense prescription medication, most doctor offices aren't designed to handle the demands of stocking and keeping inventory.

So Judd took the idea to another level and QuiqMeds was born.

"The system works best with generic drugs because they don't cost as much so I can charge patients less (on average, \$15 per prescription) but still make a little profit," Judd said. Some practices even stock their machines with over the counter medicines, such as Claritin. The system is also "insurance plan agnostic," in that the patient pays the office directly.

The machines are being used to treat a variety of conditions including high blood pressure, infections, diabetes and even depression. Judd said generics are as effective as name-brand drugs and satisfy about 80 percent of the needs for a primary care physician. The machine in his office holds 40 different generic drugs — total of about 600 units — but doctors can choose from 100 different drugs.

And for those who suffer through long doctor office visits, coupled with separate trips to the pharmacy, QuiqMeds claims to hold part of the cure.

Once a patient is examined, Judd will recommend treatment and inform the patient they have the choice of getting a prescription filled at a pharmacy or buying it right in the office.

From there, Judd goes to a centrally located touch-screen, part of a secure Inventory Control Center (ICC), which is linked to a computer at the front desk. He enters a pass code or presses his finger to a biometric reader, which identifies him through his fingerprint. After that, he logs in the drug's information that is then sent to a computer at the front desk. The staff there then double-checks the information with the patient.

A printer next to machine then prints out what Judd described as a "triple-check, color-coded label" that provides verification that the correct medication was dispensed, and it was dispensed to the right person. The patient finally gets his medication from front desk staff or a nurse, along with the usual instructional literature — dosage and other information — like you would get from a pharmacy. The machine in Judd's office is in a secure area and is only accessible by office staff. The inventory is tracked by QuiqMeds staff via the Internet and the machine is only restocked by authorized company representatives.

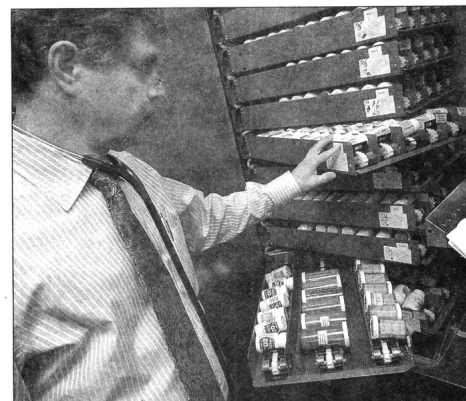
Security plays a big a part in the process, which takes only about a minute. From doctor verification, to patient verification to medicine verification, QuiqMeds appears to have all the bases covered.

But the system has its critics.

Mike Cohen, the president of the Institute for Safe Medication Practices in Huntingdon Valley, says he values the "separation between church and state" that the distinction between doctors and pharmacists provides. Cohen, a pharmacist, supports new technologies that can help people get medications, but feels they are better served in a pharmacy and controlled by pharmacist.

Cohen agreed the convenience QuiqMeds provides was a clear upside, but said the added convenience also doesn't leave the patient much time to think about their purchase.

"You have to keep in mind some drugs have adverse affects, and patients should have a chance to research and ask about



Rick Kintzel/Staff Photographer

Dr. James Judd of Hatboro Medical Associates shows some of the medications that are stored in the the QuiqMeds machine.

their medications before picking them up. I think there is some value in taking a step back and making an educated choice."

Another obstacle QuiqMeds faces is the lowering — even the elimination — of co-pays for generic drugs. Independence Blue Cross began waiving co-pays for 75 generics on Tuesday under its new Rx for Better Health program that will be in effect through Dec. 31 for some subscribers.

But Judd said between the rising cost of gas and the sheer convenience of not having to make another stop, most patients don't mind paying a little bit more.

Judd argues QuiqMeds is not about putting money in doctors' pockets; it's about making sure people are taking their prescriptions properly.

QuiqMeds charges a \$1,000 installation fee plus \$240 per month to monitor and restock the machine. The inventory is monitored 24-hours a day by QuiqMeds' staff and they are only restocked by company employees. If it is used enough, it can make about \$500 a month in profits for a health care provider.

Chris Sommer, the company's chief financial officer, pointed to a study conducted in May by the Medical Group Management Association. It found that doctors lose between \$15,000 to 17,000 per year clearing up prescription issues, like taking calls for prescription refills.

"People trust their clinicians to make the right choices for them. What they are getting is the same, safety-sealed drugs, purchased in a controlled environment, just like they would get from a pharmacy ... We just make it one-stop shopping."

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