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Supermarket Chain Offers Infusion Services



by Nancy Vessell

When a Midwest supermarket chain began offering chemotherapy and other infusion services, a few heads were turned.

“When I first learned about it, it did catch me by surprise. To my knowledge, I haven’t heard about other grocery chains getting into this [medical area],” says Michael Abrams, managing partner of Numerof & Associates, Inc., a health care consulting firm based in St. Louis, MO.

His surprise quickly transformed into admiration for the newest development in market-based, consumer-friendly health care, which he advocates. “A gold star for them,” he adds.

Pharmacy line expanded to include infusion therapy

Schnuck Markets, Inc., which operates 100 grocery stores in five states, expanded its pharmacy line by entering the infusion therapy market last year in St. Louis, where the company is based. Medication delivered by needle or catheter is administered to treat a variety of acute and chronic conditions, including cancer, heart failure, HIV/AIDS, infectious diseases, multiple sclerosis, intractable pain, and skin and wound infections.

In an announcement released in November, Schnuck’s director of pharmacy services, Dave Chism, stated, “Outpatient infusion therapy is a safe and cost-effective alternative for our patients to receive treatment conveniently and comfortably in an alternate health care

setting. Patients tend to recuperate better at home, and with [a] focus on shorter hospital stays, there’s a growing need for infusion providers.”

Patient convenience is a driver of a growing trend toward health care delivered in the retail sector, but it’s not as though an IV chair is sitting at the end of aisle 10 next to the deli. Schnucks Infusion Solutions is housed in a 6,500-square-foot center where nurses, pharmacists, and technicians prepare infusions. They administer them on-site or in patients’ homes.

The ambulatory infusion center has three infusion chairs in a comfortable room with amenities such as a snack bar, a flat-screen TV, and free Internet. Patients can make evening and weekend appointments. Nurses, all certified credentialed by Infusion Nurses Certification Corp., are on call 24/7.

While it still may seem incongruent to some people, infusion therapy in the retail sector is not new. Walgreens has provided the service for years and now has 1,400 nurses, dietitians, and pharmacists providing infusion therapy. Infusions are administered in patient homes and at ambulatory centers in areas with a capacity to serve 86 percent of the U.S. population, according to the Walgreens website.

Riding the retail wave

Retail-based medicine emerged in 2000 and has continued to grow as health care costs increasingly shift to consumers through higher co-pays and deductibles. Retail clinics in high-traffic areas typically offer quick access and lower costs for treatment for minor illnesses, as well as health screenings, physicals, and immuni-

zations. They are typically staffed by nurse practitioners and physician assistants.

As of July 1, there were 1,686 retail clinics in the United States, according to Merchant Medicine LLC. That's an increase of 79 clinics since the first of the year and 240 over the same time last year. Most clinics are operated by pharmacy chains, grocery chains, and large discount stores like Walmart and Target. Some operate in partnership with hospitals.

While the number of retail clinics is expected to grow further, the model limits the types of services they can offer, says Tine Hansen-Turton, executive director of the Convenient Care Association, the trade association for retail clinics.

"We still have small facilities; that's the reality," Hansen-Turton says. "Our limitations continue to be built on a three-to-four visits per hour business model," she adds, "and what can be done in a 15–20 minute visit."

Still, she reports that retail clinics are expanding into chronic disease management, employer-based health services, and telehealth services that bring skilled practitioners to remote areas via electronic technology.

What's next?

Abrams sees promising potential for bringing more types of health care services into the retail setting: "Honestly, retail medicine is still a new idea. There's no question it's taking off, but it's still relatively new. The challenge for retail clinics, he says, is to build out their share in the minds of the patient segment and in the physician segment as a viable health care delivery alternative. Most consumers think first of a physician office or a hospital as a place to go, so this is really reshaping the thinking of both the public and physician market."

With the Affordable Care Act creating more insured people and driving up the demand for primary care, alternative providers will be needed, especially those that can deliver quality care at a lower cost, he points out.

"The development of a market-based approach to health care is the best chance for getting health care back on track," Abrams says. "What walk-in clinics and the Schnucks idea take us to is more of a market-based approach."

Rather than pose a threat to traditional health care providers, the retail trend can be an important lesson for them, he says. "There's a lot to be learned by conventional health care providers. I hope they pay attention to this service aspect of what Schnucks is doing and [become] more patient-centric. Being a patient in an inpatient setting is anything but patient-centric in most cases."

Abrams believes infusion therapy presents a significant opportunity for growth. With the "silver tsunami" forcing a boom in the health care needs of the elderly, more home-based services will be in demand, he points out. "Home care is a great opportunity for retail, just as infusion is done at home."

Podiatry and chronic disease management are now turning up in retail settings, he adds. Increasingly sophisticated technology has enabled many formerly complex procedures to move to an ambulatory setting, and it will continue to present new opportunities for growth outside the walls of hospitals, Abrams notes, adding, "Who knows what shape it's going to take in the future."

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