

Retail clinics: Coming to a location near you?

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Expansion of Clinics

Wisconsin, like many states, has seen a recent increase in retail health clinics. The trend of placing such clinics in big box stores, grocery stores, drugstores, and even shopping malls is increasing rapidly. According to an industry survey conducted by the California HealthCare Foundation in July 2006, the number of retail health clinics is expected to increase from about 90 today to several thousand by the end of 2007.¹ Many retail health clinics are operated by outside companies and are affiliated with medical establishments to comply with state physician-ownership requirements. The clinics that have opened in Wisconsin have been tied to medical establishments to meet the requirements of practicing medicine under state law.

Aurora Health Care, the state's largest health care system, is the owner of the majority of Wisconsin's retail health clinics. Aurora Health Care opened its first QuickCare Clinic in December 2004 and now operates 14 QuickCare Clinics. These clinics are located in grocery stores, drugstores, shopping centers, and travel plazas. In addition, Bellin Health and Shopko collaborated to open two FastCare clinics in Green Bay, and ProHealth Care operates a nursing clinic at Waukesha County Technical College.

Types of Services and Staffing

Most retail health clinics are staffed

by non-physician practitioners, primarily physician assistants (PAs), and nurses with advanced degrees, such as nurse practitioners (NPs). These clinics offer consumers a limited range of services related to basic medical care and prescriptions, and provide service within approximately 15 minutes. The types of services offered vary by clinic but often include the treatment of common conditions such as fevers, sore throats, allergies, flu and colds, and ear and sinus infections. They may also provide immunizations, screenings, and sports physicals.

In most states, NPs and PAs are licensed to treat a wide range of minor illnesses under the supervision of, or in collaboration with, a licensed physician and therefore can serve as the primary staff for such clinics. The level of supervision provided by the supervising physician(s) varies from clinic to clinic. In Wisconsin, PAs and registered nurses must be supervised by licensed physicians and advanced practice nurses (e.g. certified nurse practitioners, certified nurse-midwives, certified registered nurse anesthetists) work collaboratively with licensed physicians. Aurora's QuickCare Clinics are staffed by NPs, who are supervised and supported by on-call emergency department physicians from Aurora Health Care. Wisconsin law provides advance practice nurse prescribers (APNPs) limited inde-

pendent prescribing authority² and PAs the ability to prescribe under the supervision of a physician.³ The prescribing authority of the APNPs and PAs allows for the prescribing of medications for the treatment of common illnesses at the time of the patient's clinic visit.

Appeal of Clinics

A number of factors contribute to the appeal of retail health clinics including cost, speed, convenience, and after-hours availability. For example, at Aurora's QuickCare Clinic, it will cost \$39 for a certified NP to assess a patient's needs, conduct a simple test, and, within 15 minutes, provide the patient with either a prescription for their illness or information about how to manage their symptoms and/or receive additional care. Additionally, appointments are not necessary and there are no insurance forms for patients to complete. FastCare offers similar services for \$39, which includes lab fees. FastCare also offers patients the option of billing their insurance for reimbursement. This low cost access to care is particularly appealing to patients who have health plans with a high deductible or have no insurance at all.

Adding to the appeal is that many clinics advertise they will treat patients without an appointment and within 15 minutes. This, combined with the fact that most retail clinics offer convenient hours and provide

patients access to care 7 days a week, including evenings and holidays, leads many patients to select a retail health clinic for routine care. And most of these patients appear to be satisfied with the care they receive. A 2005 *Wall Street Journal*/Harris Poll of 2245 people showed that while only 7% of respondents had visited a clinic, 92% of those who had were satisfied with the clinics' convenience and 89% were satisfied with the care they received.⁴ A Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota (BCBS of MN) survey revealed similar results, with 99% customer satisfaction.⁵

Insurance companies are also starting to support these efforts, viewing the retail health clinics as a way to reduce costs. A study by BCBS of MN analyzed 22,956 visits by its members to Minute Clinics from June 2004 to June 2005 and found the clinics cost about half of a typical physician office visit (\$43 versus \$87).⁶ Several insurers have waived co-payments for visits to retail health clinics and Cigna recently decided to provide retail clinic services for all of its members across its entire book of business.

Concerns about Clinics

Relying on retail health clinics does carry some risk for patients. Clinics typically do not have physicians on site or procedures for follow up. The clinics also do not perform comprehensive physical exams or more complex tests and, as a result, may miss a more serious condition. However, operators of retail health clinics believe they do take steps to ensure patients seek regular care from a physician. The 2005 *Wall Street Journal*/Harris Poll showed that large majorities of the public have concerns about these clinics and do not see them as purely helpful; 75% of those surveyed strongly agree or somewhat agree that they would be worried that someone working at a retail health clinic

might not accurately diagnose a serious medical problem. In addition, 71% of those surveyed in the poll strongly or somewhat agree that they would be worried about the qualifications of the staff that provide care in a health clinic not run by physicians.⁴ Many retail health clinics dismiss this concern, stating that any patients needing more extensive care will be referred to their personal physician, a primary care clinic, an urgent care center, or an emergency department, depending on their needs.

The American Medical Association (AMA) and the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) have expressed concerns about retail health clinics with no ties to the health care system, noting that the lack of such a tie may result in the fragmentation of patient care, inadequate follow-up care, and missed opportunities for preventive care. Both groups have called on clinic operators to ensure that licensed physicians supervise clinics and to establish a formal referral system with local physicians and hospitals. Additionally, the groups have issued recommendations and guidelines related to retail health clinics that address concerns such as scope of service, continuity of care, use of electronic health records, referrals, use of standardized medical protocols derived from evidence-based practice guidelines to ensure patient safety and quality of care, and supervision by a licensed, practicing physician.⁷ A number of clinics, such as FastCare, have agreed to follow the "Desired Attributes for Retail Health Clinics" issued by the AAFP to help address such concerns.⁸

Regulation

Some states have adopted legislation specifically related to retail health clinics. Florida adopted legislation that would limit the number of clinic sites that primary care physicians and specialists can supervise. Other clin-

ics have faced challenges in meeting certain state regulatory requirements, such as the requirement that the facility have a sink and a restroom.

Wisconsin has not specifically addressed the regulation of retail clinics, and the Medical Examining Board (MEB) has not issued any type of guidance on this issue to date. Until specific guidance or regulations are adopted regarding retail health clinics, such clinics will be required to abide by the current laws regulating the practice of medicine in Wisconsin, which require such clinics to have a licensed physician to supervise and/or collaborate with the staff of the clinic.⁹ If physicians or others have concerns or complaints about a specific retail health clinic or retail health clinics in general they should express those concerns to the MEB.

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