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April 2006

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30						

News

Tuesday, April 11, 2006

Local pharmacy company goes high-tech

By Donna Hilton

Published: Tuesday, April 4, 2006 1:43 PM CDT

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Although no process can be totally error-free, that is the goal for Pharmacy Care of Arkansas. The Arkadelphia business provides medications and health-care supplies to nursing homes and long-term care facilities across the state. To help achieve the goal of perfection, the pharmacy recently added a semi-automated system that uses a mechanical device, or robot, to fill prescriptions.

The system includes two computers which keep track of the medications and prescriptions and print the proper labels for the packages. It uses a robotic arm with two claws that work independently to dispense medications.

The arm removes a large pill case from the shelf surrounding it, brings it to the dispensing area and empties the prescribed number of pills into a hopper. From there, the pills fall into a plastic tray that is then placed inside a frame that folds into a blister card. Once the card is filled, another device seals the packet to make sure the pills stay in place.

The most often prescribed medications are placed in robot's reach, said Percy Malone, owner of the facility. "This is for the drugs taken every day, long-term for maintenance of a condition, like those used for treating high blood pressure," he said.

Market Watch

Index	Last Trade	Change
NASDAQ	2313.82	-19.45 ↓
SP 500	1285.99	-10.63 ↓
Russ 2000	743.21	-9.74 ↓
AMEX	1940.08	-10.91 ↓
NYSE	8214.59	-68.49 ↓
30 YR BOND	50.05	-0.31 ↓

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The device can hold up to 90 medications at one time, said John Frediani, implementation specialist for MTS, the company which manufactures the machine. The company makes several models of the machine, some which hold hundreds of medications.

The pharmacy features several safeguards, including barcodes on every prescription bottle, on each prescription label, each dispensing bottle and each prescription itself.

In the past, all prescriptions were filled by hand by pharmacy technicians. Many of the prescriptions will still be filled that way, because of the sheer volume of the work.

Three pharmacists, Kelly Dickey, Stephen Carroll and Robert Hooper are on duty full-time, verifying each prescription and making sure the right medication is supplied for each person. Once a prescription comes into the facility, whether by phone, fax or e-mail, a pharmacist verifies the information and enters it into a computer database. The computer then assigns the task to either the semi-automated station or a regular technician's station. Whether the prescription is filled by a human or the machine, each step is verified by a person and a computer using the barcodes.

For example, a prescription is entered for a commonly-prescribed maintenance medication. The computer sends that task to the semi-automated station. The machine is called semi-automated because it still takes two people to operate it. The first person verifies the order by scanning the barcode on the order and matches it with the medication's code. The machine then fills the blister pack with medication. At the end of the process, the barcode on the blister pack must be scanned into a second computer to make sure it matches the first scan. If any of these do not match, the computer halts the operation.

If the machine's technician has problems, there are several sources of help available, Frediani said. Technicians can call a toll-free number and reach MTS headquarters in Florida for assistance. The computer is also equipped with instant messenger, so the technician can talk via computer to a technician at MTS. If that doesn't work, MTS can take over control of the system and straighten out any problems.

"We can operate this machine from Florida if we need to,"

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Frediani said.

Several safety measures are also used when non-mechanical, or human technicians fill the prescriptions, Malone said. "The bar code on the order, the bottle and the label all have to match or the computer won't let (the technician) continue," Malone said.

Numerous other safeguards are built into the process, including the prescription labels. In addition to being barcoded, the labels include a description of the medication and the letters or numbers on the pill. "You know whether you've got the right medication or not, because it tells you right here," Malone said.

Before any of the medications are sent to the recipients, they are triple checked by one of the three pharmacists on duty. The medications are packed into carrying cases, where couriers deliver the cases all over the state each day.

Although the semi-automated system involved an investment of more than \$150,000, Malone thinks it will be worth it. " This machine moves us up a level to get higher productivity without increasing errors," Malone said.

The equipment is located in the building at 6th and Main streets that formerly housed Malone's drug store and soda fountain.

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