



ALLEGHENY COUNTY MEDICAL SOCIETY

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Retail Based Clinics

In our area and across the country, private companies are opening and managing health clinics in retail stores and grocery stores. These venues promote a speedy visit with a nurse practitioner or physician's assistant for a limited list of basic medical services as an alternative to physician offices or hospital emergency departments.

In-store health clinics are based on a business model that views patients as customers and health care as a commodity situated in an environment that would allow the consumer to purchase other products during the same shopping trip. One of the primary motivations for establishing health clinics in retail venues is to generate business for the outlet and its pharmacy. Federal health care laws prohibit pharmacy chains from operating their own clinics. Therefore, retail pharmacies offer leasing agreements to outside companies to establish health clinics that address specific, basic medical needs to patients on a walk-in basis and offer the option of having a prescription filled just a few steps away. Are grocery stores and pharmacies the environments in which patients want to have their future health care delivered—or is this movement an indication of a declining state of access to quality health care delivery?

The principal selling point of retail clinics to consumers is convenience. In some cases, customers don a paging device and shop for shampoo and other sundries while waiting to see professionals at the clinic. Because these clinics have weekend and evening hours, they hold the potential to reduce the need to visit an emergency room for routine care when the physician's office is closed. They also boast affordability. Some insurers waive or reduce co-pay for services received at retail health clinics.

In-store clinics are directed to a short list of treatable ailments. Basic diagnoses and services include strep throat, ear infection, sinus infection, bladder infection, influenza, several skin conditions, pregnancy testing and various vaccines. Health clinic practitioners are qualified to write medically appropriate prescriptions, but not those requiring ongoing care such as contraceptives, antidepressants and heart medications.

While consumers can obtain certain diagnoses and treatments at retail health clinics, there is one thing they cannot get—an examination by a physician. Typically, retail clinics use physicians, often from a remote location, to supervise the nurse practitioner or physician's assistant who provides the actual care. To aid the nurse practitioner or physician's assistant, some clinics use software products utilizing algorithms and protocols to assist in making diagnoses and treatment plans. Many clinics notify the consumer's primary care physician or recommend a specific physician to be contacted when continued care is necessary.

Nurse practitioners and physician's assistants are very well trained and skilled, and, in fact, provide a great service in doctors' offices. However, in a setting where a physician is not present to examine patients, there is a risk of inaccurate diagnosis or of missing a serious medical condition. Seemingly "simple" cases often aren't really simple. Physicians spend many years studying and practicing medicine in order to discern whether an apparently "simple" symptom is indicative of a more significant problem. Moreover, unforeseen complications from the original ailment or from the treatment could result in an additional visit to an emergency room or a physician's office resulting in another round of screening, testing and treatment.

Requirements for physician supervision of retail health clinics vary from state to state. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania will likely consider these retail health clinics as an extension of a

physician's office and regulations governing the supervising doctor will probably come from the Bureau of Professional and Occupational Affairs rather than the Department of Health, which regulates specialty clinics such as imaging, dialysis, or drug rehabilitation centers.

Follow-up care is another concern with quick-stop clinics. Visiting a retail health clinic in a pinch should not replace having a primary care physician oversee a patient's overall care. Quick care is not the same as primary care. The physician-patient relationship is significant in terms of continuity of care and establishing a "home base" for a patient's medical history. In addition, most practices are affiliated with a larger health care system and have a physician on call for after-hours emergencies. Physicians practice with patient care as their first priority.

Before considering a retail health clinic, patients should conduct the same research they would in selecting a physician. Find out the name and location of the physician or practice that supervises the clinic's staff and learn how often and the means by which they monitor the clinic—by telephone, computer or onsite visits. Ask the clinicians for their credentials. Understand the clinic's diagnostic and treatment offerings and request a list of physician referrals, in case your medical need goes beyond the clinic's range of services. Beware of clinics that "self-refer" patients to products and services (e.g. the pharmacy) that are situated a few feet away from the clinic. Check if the clinic communicates a patient's information to his or her primary care physician.

Although retail health clinics offer services in a convenient manner, consumers need to use caution and common sense when choosing to visit these facilities. When used appropriately as a supplement to primary and specialty care, patients could save some time and perhaps money when certain non-emergent medical situations arise. However, these clinics should not be considered an alternative to the continuity of care established through an ongoing doctor-patient relationship with a primary care physician.

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The Allegheny County Medical Society has 2,500 physician members from all specialties and is dedicated to providing leadership and advocacy on healthcare issues for the community and physicians. The organization has been serving Allegheny County since 1865. For more information, please contact ACMS at 412-321-5030 or acms@acms.org.