

Pharmacy aims for increased safety efficiency with automation

A robot enclosed in a 12-foot by 12-foot cage dispenses all manner of medication and another dispenser, Pac Med, dispenses drugs and packages for it. The packaging shows what time it was packaged, by which employee, drug strength and lot number. "It's all in the barcode," said Lisa Jasso, a buyer and registered pharmacy technician. When using the robot, pharmacists input an order into the computer, which interfaces with the robot. The robot reads the patient's barcode and the order is sent up to the nurses through pneumatic tubes, Jasso said. A nurse scans the barcode before giving a patient the drugs and the computer confirms that it's the right patient, the right prescription and the right time to administer the drug. If it's wrong, the computer won't let the nurse dispense it. In a recent demonstration, the robot grabbed several drugs off hooks and discarded the ones that were overstocks or had gone past their expiration date. "It will take multiple drugs, read them and put them exactly where they need to go," Jasso said. The robot has been in place for eight years, but several staff members are working toward optimizing it for an envelope system that will come online in August. The envelope system will seal prescriptions in an envelope for each patient and allow less handling by people. "The envelope will have the patient's name on it. I think it will be (fewer) steps and more efficient," Clinical Manager Christy McWilliams said. She added it will increase patient safety, although prescriptions are already secure. Having automated pharmacy systems saves staffers a lot of time, Jasso said. "Everything talks to each other," she added. Physicians can put a prescription request into a system called Putty so nurses no longer have to decipher handwriting. "It's pretty much a paperless system," Jasso said. Pharmacist Patricia Van Cleave has been on the job about 20 years. "It has freed us up so we can do more clinical work. It gives the patient better care. We do so much more evaluating of the patient's profile ... checking renal function and making sure the drugs and doses are indicated based on their condition," Van Cleave said. McWilliams said the in-patient pharmacy employs 32 people per 24-hour period on the main campus. West Campus has a two-employee pharmacy and the main campus takes over after it closes. The IV room where bags for people who can't eat, chemotherapy and antibiotics, among others are put together, has two employees. Jasso said more is done there than when she came on board 15 years ago. And just because there's more automation than when McWilliams people are still needed. "The thing is, we're busy," she said "We need more automation. The population is getting older. Patients are sicker. I don't think that trend is going down. I think we're going to need similar staff, but they'll have to be more knowledgeable. There's just so much more to know than when I started 30 years ago." It seems every pharmacy employee has been there for years. "There's a lot of diversity with our jobs. There is no monotony," McWilliams said. Jasso said she likes the people with whom she works. "And we get paid well for what we do. This is a pleasant environment. It's like our second family. We're here more than we're at home," she added.

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