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Ethics and Issues: Your thoughts on remote dispensing

Do you know anything about the 'Pharmacy ATMs' launched in Ontario and do you think it is a positive development?

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Q. I recently read about a new 'Pharmacy ATM' launched in Ontario. Do you know anything about this and do you think it is a positive development? To be honest, this stuff scares me.

A. This new 'ATM' is called Pharma Kiosk and it was developed by Canadian engineering company TCE Group. It is already deployed in select locations in Toronto.

Pharma Kiosk is different from existing remote dispensing kiosks. It is a machine that looks like an ATM, which lets patients submit written prescriptions (physically inserting them into the terminal) for later pick-up at the pharmacy that owns the kiosk.

The terminal could exist outside of the pharmacy when you lock and leave or in any remote location of convenience to patients (like a mall or train station).

The prescription is held within the terminal and is not returned to the patient, but is delivered to the pharmacy that fills the prescription. A phone is available at the kiosk for contact with the pharmacy, but presumably counselling is provided by the pharmacist when the patient picks up the prescription. It is meant as a convenient option to save time waiting at the pharmacy, perhaps as an alternative to the physician faxing the prescription.

It is natural to fear change, but this should not be used as a reason to resist the implementation of a good idea. The Canadian medical system is archaic with respect to the use of technology. Despite the fact that existing technologies (like electronic medical records) are known to improve safety and efficiency, very few clinicians are using them. It is about time that health providers, such as pharmacists, embrace technology.

The more that pharmacists can implement systems that assists with the technical tasks of dispensing, the more time we will have to talk to patients and the fewer errors we will make. Assuming that our regulatory bodies ensure these technologies meet legal requirements and maintain the security of health information, we have nothing to fear.

Although I have not used Pharma Kiosk, it appears to have potential. Since patients swipe their health card prior to inserting the prescription, it should prevent errors related to incorrect patient identity.

In addition, it should allow pharmacy staff to improve dispensing efficiency as it bypasses the prescription intake process and allows the team more flexibility in filling the prescription (since the patient is not leaning over the counter waiting).

Pharmacists will just have to be careful that any screening and questioning that is normally done at prescription drop-off is still performed when patients who use Pharma Kiosk pick up their medication.

I believe this is only the start of a major technological revolution in the entire medical system, similar to changes that occurred in the banking industry 20 years ago. So hold on my colleagues, we ain't seen nothin' yet.