

BUSINESS SPOTLIGHT

Making Prescriptions Safer

JC firm's dispensers cut down on errors

JOHNSON CITY -- Pharmacists at Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, Miss., fill about 2,000 prescriptions a day.

With that kind of volume -- an average chain store fills 2,000 prescriptions in a week -- mistakes were inevitable as pharmacists hand-counted each order. The result of those mistakes could be shorting a client on pills, or worse, giving a patient the wrong prescription.

Then automation took hold, making the monotonous task of hand counting prescriptions in trays -- which could lead to cross-contamination of pills -- appropriate for only the most obscure prescription.

In the past five years, automated pill dispensers such as the devices made by Innovation Associates of Johnson City have dramatically cut down on errors, Air Force pharmacists said.

"The good thing about the system we now have is that it identified everything -- ointments, creams, drops and pills," Master Sgt. Lawrence Eischen, pharmacy technician at Keesler, recently told Military Medical Technology. "That is something we've never had in a filling capacity before."

From an idea in Harry Boyer's head, Innovation Associates has been one of the pioneers in pharmacy automation. Innovation Associates' PharmASSIST, an automated pill dispenser, is used at more than 75

Air Force bases, 650 CVS pharmacies across the country and countless other independent and chain pharmacies.

"We're just going to see steady growth," predicts Mary Reno, Innovation Associates chief executive. Reno is Boyer's daughter. Boyer remains with the company as chief technology officer.

Each PharmASSIST unit is capable of holding 48 to 50 pill hoppers. Pharmacies usually load the most popular pills into the automated machines. When a prescription order arrives, the pharmacist will type the order into a computer and the machine will count out the exact number of pills. The machine then drops them into a canister.

Cardinal Health just announced a venture with Innovation Associates to make the PharmASSIST available to thousands of independent operations across the country.

"A large part of the market is just realizing that they need what we have," Reno said.

Innovation Associates, which has built and placed about 1,000 systems nationwide, now employs about 100 people building, developing and supporting pharmacy automation equipment and software at two Johnson City facilities.

At 1,000 PharmASSIST installations, Innovation Associates has just

scratched the market. By Reno's account there are more than 50,000 pharmacies across the country.

"You go after these guys one by one," Reno said. "You either grow in this business or you're out of business."

The company is now undertaking its most challenging task to date, building a prescription-dispensing robot that will be able to fill 7,000 orders daily. The unit will eventually be capable of filling prescription orders placed by Air Force personnel worldwide though phone calls and the Internet in a matter of hours. The new military pharmaceutical center is scheduled for fall completion.

The high-volume robotic pill dispenser is the next logical step for the Johnson City company, Reno said. It opens the possibility that a retail drug chain could operate regional pill-dispensing centers. Customers would call in their refills, which would be filed through the Web and delivered the next day to the local pharmacy.

"We going after their refill volume," Reno said.

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