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The Retail Clinic Revolution, and Why Physicians (and Hospitals) Should Take Notice

Rather than trying to regulate retail clinics, hospitals and physicians should take some lessons from them, says contributor Anthony Cirillo.

A major drug store retailer sent me a box of tissues recently announcing their new clinic opening in a local store, one of 300 they are planning this year. Turns out I needed the tissues so I could cry over the poor service I have received from my physician over the last several months.

I'll bore you with my medical problems to make a point. My legs have been killing me--so I trudged off to the general practitioner. "Could be your back." So then I'm off for an MRI, and then to see the orthopod. The orthopod rules out the back, and sends his report back to my physician.

Two weeks of calling, and no return calls from my physician. I barge into the office at 5 p.m. without an appointment. They were about to close, but he was "forced" to see me in an unscheduled and unpaid visit. "We must get you to a rheumatologist," he says. The physician promises he will do the research to find the right one, looks me in the eye and says "you will get a call back this time." It's now been a month. With my calls unanswered and my legs not diagnosed, my hunt for a new physician is on.

It is any wonder retail clinics, with all their convenience, are going to take off? Now granted, my condition is not suited for that setting, but when you talk about customer convenience, these clinics have it all over your doctor's office. So of course the knee jerk reaction is to try to legislate against them, with the American Medical Association taking the lead. The right course would be to realize that the marketplace will win. People will want these. People do want these. So it's time to learn some lessons from your new competitors.

It's All About Convenience

When was the last time your primary care physician did something that was convenient for you? Here are some examples:

Extended Hours. For some reason, physicians still don't understand that people work during the day. Company sick policies revolve around their schedule. The winners are those who can see patients on the patient's schedule. Offices should routinely be opened for 12 hours so that a physician, NP and PA are always available. Physicians can overlap schedules like pharmacists do in order to provide full coverage.

House Calls. I am old enough to remember these. Talk about convenience. If you want to compete, these can no longer be viewed as a novelty but a necessity. I have a physician friend in Italy. While I tease him about his limited office hours, truth is he is on the road in the Italian countryside tending to his patients all day.

Concierge Services. Give out your cell phone number. Consult via the Internet. Institute a pick up and drop off service for elderly clients. Actually return phone calls. Provide your email. See people at their appointment time or compensate them in some way and likewise institute rules for late patients. Adding other services after asking your patients what they want and consulting with your front line staff. Some may label these concierge services and want to charge extra for them. Perhaps they are simply the right things to do for your patients.

Partnership

Hospitals and physicians need to start thinking about their own ventures in shopping malls, price clubs, and grocery stores. These retail clinics are referral neutral so you not only lose incremental revenue but you may be losing patients as well. Control the situation by opening your own clinics.

And If You Can't Beat Them

The more clinics that open, the more need for medical supervision. Be the entrepreneurial physician who seizes this opportunity.

General practitioners, of course, are paying attention to this but there is an opportunity here for pediatricians as well. Hurried, frazzled moms are the marketing target of these clinics. If they can bring baby in fast and get the service they need, 20 moms will be there the next day.

At the end of the day the marketplace, not the provider, decides. We have read reams on the experience economy, the customer experience, word of mouth. And it is true. You offer a great (and in this case great means convenient) service, people will come. If they like it, and they must because a major pharmacy chain would not be opening 300 of them without solid research, then they will tell others.

What are your patients saying about your practice?