

(Finally) Writing the Check for New Automation

Medi-Thrift Pharmacy is a small-town retail pharmacy that's been in business in LaFayette, Ga., since 1979. In this interview, co-owners Neal Florence, R.Ph., and Heather Staton, Pharm.D., discuss why this was the year to finally make the investment in robotic dispensing in the form of a Kirby Lester KL60.

ComputerTalk: How long had you been looking at robotic dispensing?

Neal Florence: We've been looking for five or six years. Every convention that we went to, we'd check the different vendors out. Until this year, automation wasn't a big need because we have had enough pharmacy techs to be able to handle our business. However, we recently lost a tech, and that led to our decision to go with robotic dispensing this fall.

CT: What was at the top of your list for automation?

Florence: Accuracy, first and foremost. Another feature we wanted was automation that labels the bottle. We wanted the bottle to be essentially ready to go out to the patient, except for the final verification, of course.

CT: So you are looking to the robotics to take on a significant role in your dispensing flow.

Florence: Yes. The simple fact is that we have reached the point where we still have to fill scripts, but the key is to do so as inexpensively and quickly as possible so we can focus on other growth areas.

Heather Staton: We have realized that we need this help to ensure we have more accuracy and an easier fill situation for prescriptions, while we are doing so much with our pharmacists in counseling, giving injections, and handling MTM [medication therapy management]. We're also looking to put our technicians into other roles relating to patient compliance and assisting with MTM. By utilizing robotics, we are looking at taking some of the tasks of counting and putting pills in vials off of them so we can focus more of their time on these other areas of patient care.

CT: What were the factors that led you to select the KL60 in particular?

Staton: We've used Kirby Lester tablet counters for a long time. We use the KL1Plus now, and we know Kirby Lester has a good interface with our software system from PioneerRx. Our experience has given us a high level of comfort with Kirby Lester. We are confident that the KL60 will live up to our expectations.

CT: Why did you choose a 60-cell version over, say, the 100-cell version?

Florence: Well, it was a big decision whether to go with the KL60 or the KL100.

Staton: They say that with the KL60 you're getting 35% to 45% of your prescriptions filled by the robot. When you go up to the KL100, you're getting 45% to

55%. We felt that the KL60 would meet our goal of having the robot filling at least one prescription for every order we have in a basket. When we looked at our drug list, we could see that we'd get the efficiency that we needed from the KL60, and we realized we wouldn't hit those extra cells in the KL100 as often as we'd want to.

CT: Any key decision-making tips for pharmacists looking at automation needs?

Florence: You have to figure out how to fit the robotics into the pharmacy. You need to have a plan for how to pay for it. You need to think about how to get an ROI [return on investment]. All this comes into play. You have to be able to afford it with your cash flow, because it is equipment that requires a substantial investment. We also will readjust our prescription flow to make sure we are using our technology and staff well.

Staton: I just think you have to look at your business needs. I don't think robotics is for every pharmacy. That's why we've taken our time making the decision. We had to be confident that we're going to maximize ourselves by doing this, and that we're not just doing it because we want to. You want to make sure that it will work in your workflow, that it will work with your other systems. With our interface now, we feel like it will work much better than it may have three or four years ago, because Kirby Lester's got a solid two-way interface with our computer system. You've just got to make sure it's the right timing and the right fit for your current business model, and be ready to adjust a little bit if you need to. **CT**



Neal Florence, R.Ph., and Heather Staton, Pharm.D., say you should consider the future direction of your pharmacy when investing in automation.