Access To Affordable Health Care Through Retail Medical Clinics

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Abstract

Convenient care clinics in retail stores are rising to meet the challenge of providing quick and inexpensive medical care. For about half the cost of a physician office visit, clinic nurses diagnose and treat common health problems such as sore throats, and provide immunizations, preventative care screening, and patient education. The relative ease in accessibility and affordability are attractive to consumers seeking basic health care.

CVS operates over one hundred and fifty Minute Clinics. Walgreen’s operates fifty clinics, and by the end of 2008, they plan to open an additional four hundred. Wal-Mart recently opened four clinics in Arkansas with the anticipation of expanding to four hundred by 2010. Retail clinics partner with hospitals to enhance their image, and hospitals are realizing the potential of co-branding with clinics for a source of referral. Aetna, Cigna, Humana, and United Health Care all have contracts with Walgreens, CVS, and HEB to provide inexpensive services for their members.

Primary care physicians have many concerns about quality of care and ‘cream skimming’ - treating patients that require the least care while physicians are left with the more complicated patients that yield lower reimbursements. Nevertheless, given the rising cost of health care and limited access to physicians, particularly during non-scheduled hours, there is an evolving market for the services of retail clinics. Convenient care clinics should be allowed to develop as long as they meet guidelines for a safe environment, practice evidence-based medicine, and are directed by physicians who oversee appropriate scope of practice by clinic staff.