

Health reform to boost need for technology

NEW YORK — With changes to the country's health care system almost inevitable, the use of advanced technology in pharmacies across the country will be more critical than ever, those in the industry say.

"Regardless of whatever health care reform we get, pharmacies are still going to be there filling prescriptions. They are still going to have to deal with all of the issues they deal with now, and probably more," says Mike Coughlin, president and chief executive officer of the pharmacy technology manufacturer ScriptPro LLC.

For one thing, he notes, reform is likely to bring more need for accountability, putting more pressure on pharmacists to demonstrate outcomes if they want to be paid for their services.

"Pharmacists will not be able to get through the day without technology," he says.



Suppliers and pharmacy executives agree that as retailers deploy more and more systems in their pharmacy departments, they will need to be linked and be able to meld prescription filling and adjudication into a

single, seamless process.

"All of these systems that pharmacies are using have to connect to one another," Kirby Lester LLC vice president of business development Christopher Thomsen emphasizes. "If they do not, pharmacies are not going to be able to compete."

Community pharmacy organizations have identified three key goals for the profession that will help it remain a vital provider in the country's reformed health care system.

Pharmacy, they explain, must improve the quality of the service it delivers and the safety of the medications it provides; assure patient access to necessary medications and services; and promote the interoperability of pharmacy and health care information technology.

A spokesman for technology provider Innovation stresses

that all three of these goals can be met through the use of the company's PharmASSIST line, which was recently upgraded, as well as its PharmSafe product, which will be introduced early next year.

PharmSafe is a device designed to ensure the security of narcotics and other high-dollar medications.

Since pharmacists are expected to be spending more time with patients and less time actually filling prescriptions under a reformed health care system, automated filling systems and pharmacy robots are likely to play an increasingly vital role in pharmacies of all sizes.

Kirby Lester's Thomsen, for instance, says that consideration led the company to introduce its first robotic dispensing unit over the summer.

Known for years for its compact, inexpensive countertop counting machines, Kirby Lester unveiled its KL-60 in August. The company's third new system this year, the compact robot has a 24-inch by 48-inch footprint and fully automates the dispensing of 60 drugs.

As pharmacies scramble to make sure that they have the right technology in place to cope with the changes to the nation's health care system, suppliers say they will continue to look forward to a time when they may be required to offer such services as e-mail and text message refill reminders, on-line compliance programs and telepharmacy services.