

# Automated Counting: Adding Accuracy and Workflow

by Will Lockwood

There wasn't a single "aha!" moment that led pharmacist Jon Jacobs to add counting technology to his two stores southeast of Pittsburgh — Berlin Pharmacy, which fills an average of 150 prescriptions a day for residents of the town of Berlin, Pa., and the surrounding area, and Yough Valley Pharmacy, which fills about 125 prescriptions a day in a service area radiating approximately 25 miles out from Confluence, Pa. Instead, Jacobs found two independent sources of motivation: a pharmacy renovation and a talk he initiated with his insurance company. Both ended up giving Jacobs the chance to think about how his stores could operate more safely and more efficiently and led him, ultimately, to Kirby Lester tablet and capsule counters.

## Finding Reasons

The pharmacy renovation afforded Jacobs the chance to really think about his workflow. "I wanted more checks and balances," he says. "I wanted zero mistakes." In his mind, this meant setting up a smooth, logical flow that placed a minimal burden on his staff. And while Jacobs did already have both QS/1 point-of-sale (POS) and pharmacy management systems, his filling process was otherwise completely manual.

The second source of motivation, the review he asked his insurance company to do, was designed to provide him with recommendations that could reduce his liability exposure. "I've been fortunate to have never been part of litigation," Jacobs says. "But I wanted to know what scenarios can lead to it and what I needed to do to protect my pharmacies." As a result, Jacobs instituted logbooks to record and document any error his staff caught. The logs were then reviewed for necessary changes in work procedures. This was a very worthwhile improvement, but of course, it too was a manual process.

## Finding Answers

So the desire to make the pharmacy renovation a springboard for improved workflow and to do more with the recommendations his insurance company gave were both in Jacobs' mind when he first came across Kirby

Lester's counting technology. At this point, Jacobs notes, he still wasn't quite sure what he needed or wanted. "I didn't want to get something that my staff wouldn't use and embrace," he says. "And I was also conscious of the cost." Kirby Lester helped



**Jon Jacobs has found a great value in the tracking, recording, and verification steps of his Kirby Lester counter.**

Jacobs work through his choices by lending his stores two different models to use for a month. One model was a straightforward counting machine. The other also offered product verification and work-tracking features. At the end of the month Jacobs asked for input from his technicians and pharmacists. "They clearly understood that there was a difference in the technology between the two models," he says. "There was a difference in price, too, but I told them to ignore that and choose based on the features." Everyone chose the KL16, the model with verification and tracking features. Jacobs had his solution.

## Logging Automatically

The benefits of this new technology have been obvious since installation in April, according to Jacobs. First of all, the KL16 has taken the sound idea of the logbook and improved on it dramatically. Rather than simply recording exceptions in the filling process, the counter uses biometric scanning to log in each user, providing a time- and personnel-stamped record for each filled prescription. "We've been pleasantly surprised how well biometrics work," says Jacobs. "It is instant. You slap your finger down and you are logged into the machine." There's

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more. He gets not only an automated record of who counted a medication, but also a record of the drug counted — visually verified by his staff on the KL16's screen, the prescribed count, and the actual count. All of this information is stored and available via a simple search.

## Scan and Verify

These powerful verification features don't even require a direct interface with the pharmacy management system. They are driven by a special bar code that Jacobs has set up his QS/1 software to print on the prescription label. It contains the prescription number, the NDC number, and the quantity to be dispensed. The staff member who will count a prescription simply logs in and scans this label, which then causes the KL16 to prompt for a stock bottle scan. The prescription and stock bottle NDC numbers must match to continue. Further verification is provided by the pill image and the amount to be counted, which are both displayed on the KL16's touch screen. This process also works for unit-of-use packaging, which is identified from the bar-code scan. The unit-of-use item is then scanned and the package size and strength confirmed by a comparison between the prescription and package NDCs.

There's great value to be had in tracking and recording these verification steps. "We've been able to go back on a number of occasions to confirm that the proper medication and the proper quantity were dispensed and to see who did the counting," says Jacobs. "We all have customers who like to count their tablets and come back saying that they are missing a few," he continues. "In the past, there wasn't much to do but give them what they claimed to be missing. We could note that these people needed their prescriptions counted twice, but now we avoid this extra work because we can prove what we dispensed, who did it, and when."

## Gaining Protection

The effect of these small machines on workflow at the Berlin and Yough

Valley pharmacies has been big. It has taken a little while for the staff to learn to trust the technology, but confidence has built up quickly. "We had a few instances when we went to verify and got an error message," Jacobs says. "We'd try again, figuring something must be wrong with the machine, but the machine was right. Everyone's going to pick up the wrong item from stock occasionally without realizing it. Our new workflow means we catch these mistakes before they get anywhere." Verification has also proved its worth when Jacobs' staff pulls the right drug, but one that happens to have a



**A store renovation led Jacobs to improve workflow.**

different NDC number than the drug entered in the pharmacy management system. "This will generate an error, which also ensures that we are billing third parties for the right NDC," he explains. "It also means that we can easily comply with payers' requests to track this." Of course, on rare occasions it's necessary to override an error message. Even in these cases, the work-tracking features help. Rather than leaving an override to the discretion of the one person at the counting station, the KL16 requires the pharmacist on duty to approve it.

All the new checks throughout the dispensing process have also changed the nature of the final verification step: "Now we can focus strictly on making sure that the prescription entered in the pharmacy management system matches what's in the vial," says Jacobs. "We are confident that the steps in between are correct and have been documented." Once the QS/1 POS has recorded a prescription as paid at checkout, Jacobs has a complete chain of information for the dispensing process.

## A Change for the Better

Jacobs describes himself as very pleased with his counting technology. "We've got a good start on our new workflow," he says. "We've gotten our feet wet and we've found out that counting and workflow mean that, when you get a little bit busy, you can still be confident that you aren't overlooking anything." His experience has also given him new perspectives on adding technology, and he's happy to share his views with his colleagues. "If you want to try counting and workflow, go into it with an open mind," Jacobs advises. For example, when Jacobs first started in pharmacy, he worked at stores that had old counting technology that wasn't accurate and reliable. Still, he was willing to look and even more willing to try the demo machines Kirby Lester offered, which was what ultimately convinced him and his staff that counting technology is more than ready for today's pharmacy. "We saw firsthand the major improvements that have been made," Jacobs says.

He also points out that you need to plan on your pharmacy taking a little bit of time to acclimate to technology that changes the workflow, something that was very much the case at his pharmacies. For example, in the past his staff might have jumped away from a couple of prescriptions they were working on to count another when the stores got busy. Or a technician might have looked over the shoulder of the person doing data entry and counted a prescription before it was adjudicated. "In our new system, you can't count a prescription if it hasn't been processed and the label printed," he says. But learning the new process is a small price to pay for the standardization and accountability that the counting technology has brought. "When I consider all the prescriptions that we track and count now, I know we made a good investment," concludes Jacobs. **CT**



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