

## Retail Medical Clinics

What are they and what do they mean for Connecticut?

Retail medical clinics (RMCs) are limited-service clinics located in stand-alone drug stores, such as CVS, supermarkets, and discount department stores like Wal-Mart. MinuteClinic (owned by CVS) has more than 15 locations in Connecticut and a Farmington-based doctors' group operates one retail medical clinic now with plans to open 8 more in the state. While these clinics offer predictable costs and efficient care for simple conditions, concerns have been raised.

One concern is that the RMC model does not promote continuity of care. Fragmented care can miss important clues to underlying conditions. A related issue is the lack of attention to preventive care in the RMC model. Another concern is that there may be a conflict of interest between the clinics and the store in which they are located, driving clinicians to overprescribe medications likely to be filled in the store that hosts the clinic. A Minnesota study showed that visits to RMCs averaged \$18 less than visits to other clinics, while pharmacy costs were \$4 higher per patient. But a Tennessee study found that drugstores with RMCs wrote fewer prescriptions than those without. RMCs are not licensed as clinics, but operate on the license of an individual physician. Thus, they are accountable to a lower standard of operation. There are concerns that because RMCs provide only simple treatments and procedures — more complex, less lucrative treatments are left to traditional community providers who are already stressed financially.

### **What RMCs are and are not**

RMCs are convenient. They are open evenings and weekends when many traditional, non-emergency medical offices are closed. Service is typically rendered within a half-hour. RMCs offer basic services such as simple screenings, vaccines and treatment for uncomplicated conditions such as pink eye, athlete's foot, allergies, bronchitis and sinus infections. Prices typically range from \$29 to \$110 and are prominently posted.

RMCs are usually staffed by advanced practice nurses, though they may be staffed by physician assistants and/or doctors. The clinics are modeled for one-time care, rather than ongoing treatment. They are not equipped to diagnose or deal with complex cases, to follow up on treatment, or to offer many diagnostic tests.

Retail medical clinics are not medical homes. The Convenient Care Association encourages its members to build relationships with and make referrals to traditional health care providers and hospitals; however, retail medical clinics are not currently required to make such connections. Additionally, no system exists to track patient visits to retail clinics.

**Who do RMCs serve**

Five per cent of US households have used in-store clinics. Though many argue that retail medical clinics increase access to basic medical services for the uninsured, a recent poll found that 78% of RMC patients are insured. Due to the limited menu of services, RMCs are only equipped to serve less-sick patients with simple problems.

**Regulations**

In Connecticut, RMCs currently operate on the license of an individual physician and, therefore, are not subject to the same requirements or oversight as other clinics. This practice is based on Department of Public Health policy regarding walk-in clinics, which have traditionally been operated by doctors under individual licenses. No statute mandates that the licensing doctor be present at all times; s/he may delegate responsibility to a Physician's Assistant or Nurse Practitioner, as long as the doctor is reachable by phone or email.

Although a number of states have passed laws that place limited requirements on retail medical clinics, in January Massachusetts became the first state to pass comprehensive regulations requiring RMCs to be licensed and inspected as clinics. Some key provisions of the regulation include:

- ▶ Application for Clinic license, including a list of the services that will be offered
- ▶ Bathroom facilities need to be reasonably close to the clinic area for the services offered (i.e., if urine tests are included in services, a bathroom needs to be nearby)
- ▶ Clinics located within another entity (i.e., a store) shall have clearly marked, handicap-accessible pathways to it
- ▶ Clinics must develop policies and procedures for staffing patterns, diagnosis and treatment of patients, referring patients in need of further services, limiting the number of repeat encounters with individual patients, providing medical records of each visit to the patient and/or the patient's primary care practitioner, barring promotion of services provided by any host retail location
- ▶ Each clinic must maintain a roster of primary care practitioners, including community health centers, in the clinic's geographic area who are currently accepting new patients, and who are willing to accept a referral from the RMC
- ▶ Each clinic must provide a hand sanitizer dispenser outside each treatment room

**Bottom Line:**

**To ensure patient safety and protect Connecticut's healthcare system, the state should design comprehensive regulations requiring Retail Medical Clinics to be licensed and inspected as clinics.**

**Sources:**

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