

Retail health care

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By Gregg Sherrard Blesch Staff writer

The retail giants want to tend to your minor pains and miseries, and CVS last week was the first to make a play in the Southland.

Health clinics opened Wednesday in five Chicago-area CVS stores, including ones in Mokena and Lockport.

Nurse practitioners at the stores can take care of vaccinations and routine ailments such as allergies, strep throat, pink eye and bladder infections. They accept most insurance plans, and a typical visit for patients paying cash costs about \$49 to \$59.

The CVS clinics are operated by MinuteClinic, a Minneapolis-based company that CVS bought last year anticipating the service would be popular and competitive.

"We were the innovators -- we were the originators," said Brian Kraus, regional operations manager for MinuteClinic. With 175 sites in 20 states, it's still the country's biggest chain, and another 30 are planned for the Chicago area in the next year.

But Wal-Mart made a splash Tuesday with a promise to put clinics in 400 stores in the next two or three years.

And Walgreens was first to bring retail medicine to the Chicago area, with 17 Health Corner clinics open now and more in the works, including what may be the first inside the city. The closest to the Southland so far are in Joliet and Romeoville.

More than 11,000 patients have been treated in the Walgreens clinics, according to a spokeswoman for Take Care Health Systems, which operates them.

Wal-Mart CEO Lee Scott, announcing his company's plans at the World Health Care Congress in Washington, framed the clinics as a solution to the country's health care crisis.

The medical establishment, though, has been leery of the upstart competition.

Physicians groups have warned that serious problems might get missed if patients go to the store when they feel bad and don't bother forming a relationship with a primary care doctor.

The Illinois State Medical Society is pushing legislation in Springfield that would regulate their operation and marketing.

But old guard health organizations also have been quick to forge partnerships with the companies.

As Walgreens and partner Take Care Health Systems announced their big Chicago push last year, Advocate Health Care signed on to provide doctors to serve as medical directors overseeing the nurse practitioners.

On Thursday, Joliet's Silver Cross Hospital announced it would take on that role for the three CVS clinics in Will County.

Kraus, the MinuteClinic manager, donned a white coat Friday morning to show off the new facility in Mokena at Lincoln Highway and Wolf Road.

It consists of a check-in kiosk, two small rooms and a waiting area along a wall near the pharmacy.

Most visits take about 15 minutes, Kraus said.

"I think we're going to rewrite history, giving people another avenue for health care," Kraus said. But, he added, "That continuum of care goes back to their doctor."

Each site develops relationships with surrounding physicians for referrals when the patients need follow-up care and have no primary care physician.

"We are actually adjunct," Kraus said.

If someone were to show up with a "dripping lacerated finger," Kraus said, the nurse practitioner would get the bleeding under control and then direct the patient to an emergency room or urgent care center.

*Gregg Sherrard Blesch may be reached at
gblesch@dailyouthtown.com*