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## **Now: Fast, affordable health clinics**

**They are appearing everywhere and making money for their investors.**

**By Stacey Burling - Inquirer Staff Writer**

Eighteen-year-old Myesha Wilson decided to make the most of her one-day suspension from school early this month by getting a physical for her driver's license application.

Her doctor told her she would have to wait a month for an appointment. In the past, that probably would have foiled her impromptu plan, but she had an alternative.

She went to CareWorks Convenient Healthcare, a tiny clinic attractively sandwiched between the pharmacy and magazine section of an Allentown King's grocery store.

No appointment necessary. No waiting.

For \$30, nurse practitioner Janelle Sharma took Wilson's medical history, checked her out, and lectured her gently about responsible driving.

In about 15 minutes, Wilson, who lives in Allentown, was on her way with the paperwork she needed and a good impression of one of today's hottest ideas in health-care delivery.

Clinics like the one in Allentown, which is owned by Geisinger Health System and which opened at the end of January, are springing up in drug, grocery and big-box stores around the country. They emphasize quick service, long hours, computerized records, and clear, affordable pricing.

A growing number of entrepreneurs see them as a way to make money while making the simplest medical care - treatment for common conditions such as flu, strep throat or diarrhea - cheaper and more convenient. Host stores, which lease space to the clinics, see them as a way to attract new customers and foster loyalty.

At CareWorks, for example, treatment for illnesses costs \$55 and is available nights and weekends. In an effort to be user-friendly, Take Care Health Systems Inc., a clinic company based in Conshohocken, proudly based its computerized check-in program on the Wawa hoagie-ordering system.

"We built a model for immediate gratification, which is what somebody wants when they're ill, or their child is ill," said Hal Rosenbluth, Take Care's cofounder and board chairman.

Gov. Rendell's new health-care plan would reward health-care providers for offering care in evenings and on weekends as a way of discouraging people from visiting emergency rooms for nonemergency problems. In January, Rendell visited a Take Care center in an Eckerd Pharmacy in Irwin, Pa., to promote the plan.

There are about 300 retail health clinics in the United States now, up from about 60 in January 2006, said Mary Kate Scott, a Los Angeles health-care consultant who wrote a recent report on the trend for the California HealthCare Foundation. She said she expected the number to more than double by the end of this year and reach 2,500 to 3,000 within five years. Clinic operators, she said, forecast even more, but she said she thought difficulty in acquiring space, permits and staff would hold them back.

Scott said she doubted the clinics would ever serve more than a tiny portion of patients, but she said they were important because they were a novel way of adjusting to several important trends:

Increasing consumer price-consciousness as more have no insurance or insurance with high deductibles and co-payments.

The tendency to use relatively expensive emergency rooms for minor problems.

The looming shortage of primary-care doctors.

The declining tolerance among busy patients for inconvenience.

The clinics are a "true innovation in health-care delivery," Scott said. "What I think is really important... is that they are making everyone in the health-care system say: 'Hang on. Is there a new and better way to do it?'"

Doctors are a little less enthusiastic. Physician groups caution that the clinics, which usually are staffed by nurse practitioners or physician assistants, need strict limits and significant physician oversight.

"We don't want these clinics to become just business applications. We want them to be about health care," said Mark Piasio, a Dubois orthopedic surgeon who is president of the Pennsylvania Medical Society.

Even apparently minor problems such as sore throats can signal bigger medical issues, doctors said.

Martin Trichtinger, an Abington internist, said one of his patients, who had diabetes, became seriously ill after a retail center in Minnesota prescribed an antibiotic for her sinus problem that was known to cause erratic blood-sugar levels.

Center leaders counter that nurse practitioners are well-equipped to handle the conditions they see, follow practice guidelines, and refer out complicated cases.

"We're not trying to be heroes," said Sharma, the Geisinger nurse practitioner in Allentown.

David Nash, chairman of the department of health policy at Jefferson Medical College, is chairman of Take Care's advisory board. He used Jefferson doctors to vet the company's practice guidelines.

"They had me at hello," he said. "It's an outstandingly good idea to improve access, to standardize nonemergency care, to create a defusing valve for emergency rooms."

Despite the fact that Take Care, one of the largest clinic companies, is based here, the Philadelphia area has no retail clinics. Yet.

"There's a lot of interest," said Tine Hansen-Turton, executive director of the newly formed Convenient Care Association, a national group based in Philadelphia. "I think we'll see it very soon."

AtlantiCare Health System is bringing its HealthRite clinics into central New Jersey ShopRite groceries. MinuteClinic Inc., which started the idea of retail health clinics in Minneapolis in 2000 and is now owned by drugstore chain CVS Corp., is in North Jersey and eyeing this market.

Rosenbluth, Take Care's cofounder, said it had delayed entering the Philadelphia market while one of its retail partners, Eckerd Corp. drugstores, was merging with Rite Aid Corp. "We're going to be coming to Philadelphia, and we're coming in a big way," he said.

Take Care has 42 clinics in Kansas City, Mo.; St. Louis; Pittsburgh; and Chicago, and it will soon open five in Milwaukee. It plans to have 200 open by the end of the year and eventually wants 2,500, Rosenbluth said.

While many patients pay cash, clinics may also accept insurance. Some employers, such as Black & Decker Corp., encourage workers to use the clinics.

Scott, the California consultant, said most of the clinics were not yet making a profit, because customers are slow to change. The Allentown clinic, for example, is seeing an average of just five patients in a 12-hour day.

It takes 24 to 36 months - and 17 to 23 patients a day - for a clinic to break even, Scott said. She said she thought they were most likely to work in big stores that draw 25,000 shoppers a week. Owners have been reducing clinic sizes - down from an average of 350 square feet to 220 - and increasing marketing, she said.

Rosenbluth said the clinics could do well in smaller stores. People do not want to drive to a "huge supercenter and park far away" when they are sick, he said. His company's Kansas City locations, which have been open 14 months, are averaging 25 patients a day.

On the other hand, the company pulled out of Portland, Ore., a market that Rite Aid picked, Rosenbluth said. It turned out people in Portland do not have trouble accessing primary-care doctors, company cofounder and president Peter Miller said.

Take Care has also learned that clinics are not a way to bolster an unpopular store. Now, the company is doing its own research on potential locations.

"A bad location for them," Miller said, "is a bad location for us."

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*Contact staff writer Stacey Burling at 215-854-4944 or [sburling@phillynews.com](mailto:sburling@phillynews.com).*