



SMART PATIENT

Health Care In a Hurry

Store-based medical clinics have expanded tenfold in the past two years. Looking for a flu shot and sinus relief, we visit some of the biggest U.S. chains.

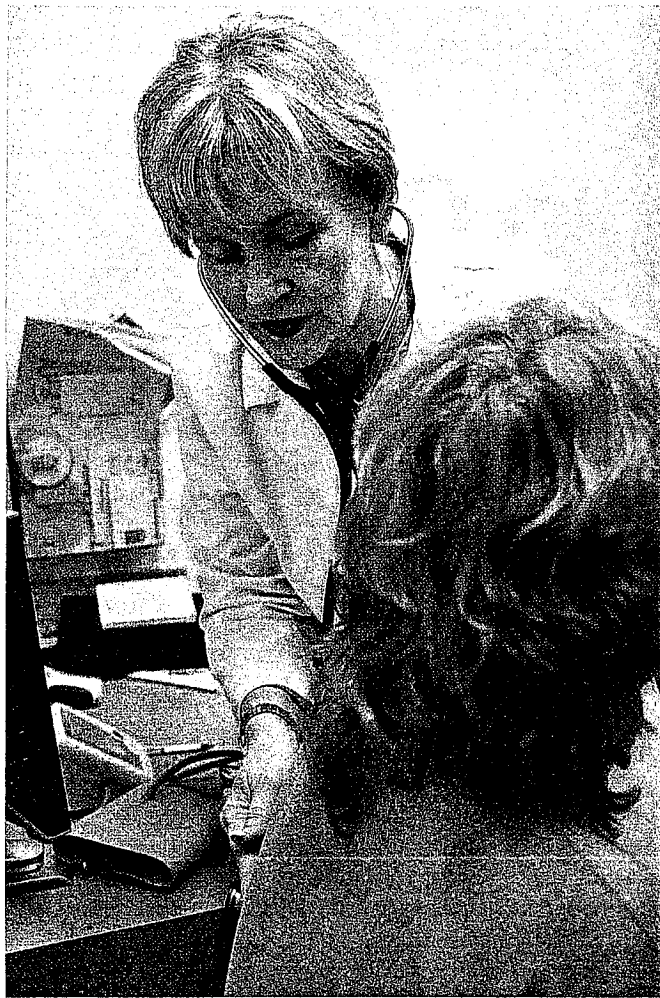
By Angie C. Marek

It starts out like any routine doctor visit: A medical assistant greets us at the reception desk with a plastic clipboard. Reading material ranges from the usual well-pawed magazines to brochures for diabetes management and cancer support. A fellow patient-in-waiting furiously thumbs away on his BlackBerry. The only thing we don't expect as we sit filling out our insurance paperwork? Getting bumped in the shin by several passing shopping baskets.

You may have noticed one at your local drugstore or supermarket, just up the aisle from the mouthwash and Flintstones Vitamins—a retail health clinic, where the doctor (or more likely, the nurse-practitioner) is almost always in. With the battered economy putting more pressure on people's ability to cover health costs, and the ranks of primary-care physicians dwindling, analysts say these clinics could become a nifty niche for U.S. drugstores (CVS pharmacy, Walgreens), supermarkets (Kroger, Cub Foods) and big-box chains (Wal-Mart, Target), which have shoehorned about 1,100 of them into stores. Indeed, while their growth has slowed lately, the number of clinics shot up tenfold between 2006 and 2008 alone, drawing nearly four times as many customers over the same time period.

One major drawing card, of course, is price: They're cheaper than doctors. The Deloitte Center for Health Solutions recently found that a typical clinic visit costs between \$50 and \$75, compared with \$55 to \$250 for a physician. (One clinic even recently announced that it would waive sick-visit fees through 2009 for anyone who can prove that they are both unemployed and uninsured.) The main reason people go this route, though, is to save time. With names like MinuteClinic and Curaquick, these facilities promise vaccines, simple screenings and treatment for routine illnesses, like ear infections or pinkeye, with Jiffy Lube speed and convenience. In fact, while most doctors still live by the 9-to-5 credo, retail clinics offer evening and weekend hours that work better with Americans'

Photograph by Darrell Eager for SmartMoney



CVS MINUTE CLINIC aggressively promotes its \$30 flu shots with in-store signs and radio announcements.

hectic schedules. And most take major insurance.

Still, despite promises of shorter waits, some clinics can have long lines or such strict treatment limitations that patients often leave frustrated. Physicians have raised concerns about whether store clinicians know enough about their patients' medical histories, especially those with multiple chronic conditions, like diabetes and depression. And with only about half of U.S. in-store clinics currently profitable—and some drug chains deriving nearly 70 percent of their revenue from the pharmacy counter—critics wonder whether

the clinics might lean toward overprescribing meds, a charge the chains deny. CVS pharmacy's MinuteClinics, for one, says its protocol is not to prescribe antibiotics unless a patient meets a strict list of preconditions; for a sinus infection, for instance, you'd need to have been sick with symptoms like "yellow or green drainage" for seven days and unresponsive to over-the-counter drugs.

Clinic champions, however, remain bullish. "Years from now," says Tine Hansen-Turton, head of the Convenient Care Association, an industry trade group, "we'll say the clinics made Americans healthier because they let patients get care earlier in their illnesses, on their schedules." Unsure what to expect, we decided to give this new trend a tryout, shopping our own minor ailments around these minuscule medical facilities.

As we pull into the strip mall in Riverside, Conn., we have no trouble finding the large MinuteClinic sign above the CVS pharmacy entrance. But inside is another story. The clinic is stashed in a far corner of the store; even standing 10 feet away, we miss it—until the pharmacist points out a nondescript door and, next to it, a small check-in kiosk. Nearby, a flat-screen TV displays something we've never seen in a lifetime of doctor visits: a price list for the clinic's 30-plus services. There are treatments for routine ailments like strep throat (\$77), bladder infections (\$67) and swimmer's ear (\$62), as well as wellness offerings like camp physicals (\$59) and cholesterol screening (\$45).

Checking in on a quiet

weeknight around 7 p.m., we have the place to ourselves, so the nurse-practitioner ushers us right in for our flu shot. The clinic turns out to be roughly the size of a small kitchen pantry (85 square feet), with few trappings of a doctor's office—no visible exam table and no eye charts. Instead, there are a few plastic chairs, a supply cabinet and a desk, on which sit a computer and a bottle of hand sanitizer. While this location has a small sink, not every MinuteClinic does. Donna Jeskey, then operations manager for MinuteClinic's New Jersey locations, says, "Using hand sanitizer between each visit, like our nurses do, is just as safe—if not safer—for the patient." Still, the company says it is currently in the process of retrofitting all of its clinics with sinks.

As our nurse gives the syringe a preparatory flick, she tells us how busy she's been, administering 50 flu shots alone the day before. Turns out, the majority of the company's fall and winter business comes from flu shots—a service it aggressively promotes in stores with frequent loudspeaker ads and cardboard placards hanging over nearly every aisle. To our delight, she also informs us that our insurance fully covers the \$30 vaccine. "Nice insurance," she says. "Do you work for a hedge fund?" Then she flits over to the pharmacy to chat up customers waiting for prescriptions. "I can take a look at your cold," she offers.

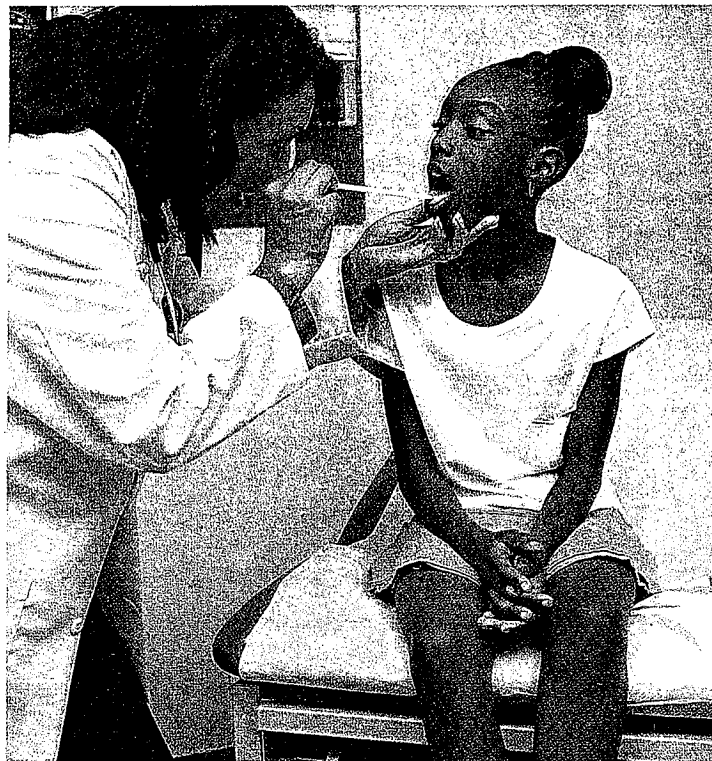
At Take Care Clinics, tucked inside more than 340 Walgreens drugstores, CEO Peter Miller says the biggest challenge is

Photograph by Evan Kafka for SmartMoney; inset images (from left) by TS Photography; Don Farrall; Nathan Blaney; Dorling Kindersley/Getty (4)

long lines, sometimes stretching almost two hours at popular locations. And it turns out he isn't kidding. Having developed a sore throat and fever the day after a major holiday, when most doctors' offices are clamped up tight, we drive to the nearest Take Care Clinic, located on a busy commercial strip in suburban St. Louis. When we get there, the check-in kiosk announces a full two-and-a-half-hour wait.

Had we known that we could, we'd have called ahead to the company's toll-free number to get the wait time and put our name in the queue. The company says it also staffs some clinics with a "concierge" to manage backups, but on this day there's none in sight—just a nurse pulling double duty. Between patients, she comes to the reception desk, takes our cell phone number and offers to call 15 minutes before she can see us (which she does). At least we don't end up trapped with the usual collection of magazines.

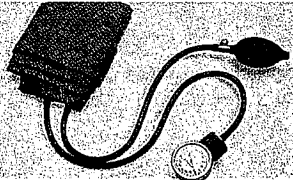

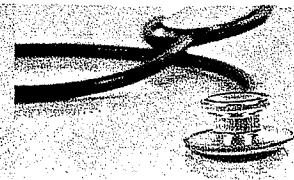
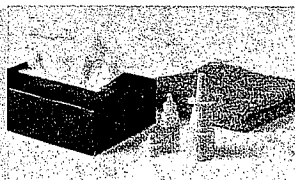
Once inside the clinic, it feels like a doctor's office. We find



AT TAKE CARE CLINIC the wait can be long, but there's a toll-free number to call ahead to put your name in the queue.

ourselves oddly comforted by the front-and-center exam table, the standing scale and wall-mounted blood-pressure cuff. After taking a fairly detailed history and examining us, the nurse asks what antibiotics we usually take, since we get frequent sinus infections; she then prescribes a different one, explaining that it will keep us from developing a drug resistance. Two days later, following Take Care protocol, she calls to see how we are feeling and ask if we

need additional information or a doctor referral. (The company's nurses get bonuses, in part, based on customer satisfaction ratings.) That follow-up is one way that, CEO Miller says, "we're putting the patient first during every part of the process." Of course, the company's not above a little up-selling. Before we leave the office, the nurse suggests we consider a neti pot—one of Oprah's favorite sinus remedies, she says. "It's in aisle 10C." **S**

|  MinuteClinic |  Take Care Clinic |  The Little Clinic |  RediClinic |
|--|---|---|--|
| SIZE: 560 clinics in 25 states INSURANCE: 98 carriers STARS: ★★ LOCATION: CVS pharmacy | SIZE: 341 clinics in 19 states INSURANCE: 46 carriers STARS: ★★★★★ LOCATION: Walgreens | SIZE: 96 in nine states INSURANCE: 31 carriers STARS: ★★ LOCATION: Various grocers | SIZE: 21 in one state INSURANCE: 11 carriers STARS: ★★★★★ LOCATION: H-E-B stores |
| SINUS INFECTION: \$62 | SINUS INFECTION: \$59 | SINUS INFECTION: \$59 | SINUS INFECTION: \$75 |
| STREP THROAT: 77 | STREP THROAT: 74 | STREP THROAT: 69 | STREP THROAT: 75 |
| FLU SHOT: 30 | FLU SHOT: 25 | FLU SHOT: 15 | FLU SHOT: 25 |
| COMMENTS: Accredited by the Joint Commission, which certifies hospitals. Inability to phone their nurse directly can frustrate patients; the company says "it's a logistical issue" and offers an 800 number instead. | COMMENTS: The best of our bunch. Nurses have more flexibility here than at many to prescribe different drugs, and doctors audit some diagnoses to ensure quality. Treatment protocol includes follow-up calls. | COMMENTS: Prices are often lower than competitors', but privacy can be lacking: Some clinics have frosted glass walls that don't reach the ceiling. A spokesperson says, "The layout depends on what the retail space will allow." | COMMENTS: This Texas chain boasts unique offerings like in-depth allergy testing, travel vaccinations and acne treatment—as well as private restrooms. Management acknowledges long wait times in its more popular clinics. |