

E-prescribing ups number of prescriptions filled

By: *Joseph Conn / HITS staff writer* October 16, 2007

Pharmacists saw better than an 11% increase in the number of prescriptions at their stores and, maybe, their cash registers, too, when physicians started using electronic prescribing systems, according to a recently released announcement about a study conducted by the giant drugstore chain Walgreen Co., the electronic prescribing exchange SureScripts and data-miner IMS Health.

Researchers tracked the prescription data provided by IMS Health on 100 prescribers in five states for three months before and three months after they began using e-prescribing systems from 15 different vendors, a joint Walgreen-SureScript news release about the study said.

In the three months before the participating prescribers started using an e-prescription system, their pharmacies received 272,103 prescriptions, the statement said. In the three months after the prescribers started using e-Rx systems, prescriptions from them jumped by 30,513, or 11.2%, to 302,616, it said. The study included data from 93 pharmacy organizations—not just Walgreen Co.—at 14,638 locations.

The 19-month study period stretched from April 2005 through November of last year. Results were adjusted for seasonal differences in prescribing.

According to the news release, an estimated 20% of all new prescriptions go unfilled while the rate of prescription refills that are not picked up is even higher. Total U.S. retail spending on prescription drugs from all sources in 2005 totaled about \$201 billion, according to a February 2007 report from the Government Accountability Office, citing CMS data on national healthcare expenditures.

To put in perspective what an 11% increase in prescription volume might mean to the pharmaceutical industry, in 2005, the pharmaceutical industry spent \$4.2 billion on direct-to-consumer marketing and another \$6.8 billion on boots-on-the-street selling, or detailing, of drugs to physicians and other prescribers, according to a report published Aug. 16 in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

And while the overall study did not include what percentage of prescriptions received at the pharmacies were actually paid for and taken home by patients, an analysis by Walgreen Co. of its own sales records did indicate the e-prescribing systems had an impact on the cash register, according to company spokesman Michael Polzin.

Actual percentage sales increases weren't provided, even on request, but Polzin said, "Walgreens looked at our own data from the study, and we were able to determine that as many if not more patients picked up their prescriptions if they were sent electronically. If more (prescriptions) are being sent electronically, that means more (patients) are getting their medications."

One significant data element to be gleaned from e-prescribing is a better representation of exactly how many prescriptions go unfilled, since electronic prescribing systems record not only prescriptions picked up—the numerator in such a percentage—but also the number of prescriptions written and sent—the denominator—a total that can only be estimated in paper-based prescribing.

The study did not try to determine a cause for the higher level of prescriptions arriving at pharmacies, Polzin said, but ease of use may have been a factor.

"Anything that makes it easier is going to help the process," Polzin said. According to Polzin, using 2005 figures, the average cost of a name-brand prescription drug was \$101; generic, \$30; and combined, \$65.