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Low-cost clinics raise their profile

By Christopher Bowe and Jonathan Birchall in New York

Companies operating low-cost medical clinics in drugstores or big retail stores such as Wal-Mart are about to signal their arrival as a force in the US healthcare system by forming an industry association and lobby group.

Clinic companies such as RediClinic, **CheckUps** and Take Care are leading the way in building low-cost medical clinics offering basic preventative medicine and health guidance, along with examination and treatment for minor illnesses.

The clinics use a nurse practitioner who can write prescriptions, test and treat illnesses such as "strep throat", and refer patients to doctors for more serious conditions.

By the end of next year, hundreds of walk-in clinics will be open in some of the country's largest drugstore and retail groups, including Wal-Mart, Target, CVS, Walgreens and RiteAid.

The industry association, which may be called the Convenient Care Industry Association, marks a coming of age for the burgeoning industry, which could transform the US healthcare landscape. Some of the industry's entrepreneurial energy is pushing to create a quicker and more widely available use of electronic health records for patients.

It also marks a new voice in the scramble for healthcare funding, and in the debate over how to spend more efficiently.

In addition it underlines that the retail clinics, which can cost half of a regular doctor's visit at \$50 (€38, £26.50), are keen to promote themselves.

Jack Tawil, chief executive of CheckUps, said: "We've gone from legislation to wipe us out to 'let's get in right now because this is the future'."

Peter Miller, chief executive of Take Care, said: "We think it's a great idea and really a sign the industry is coming of age. The industry is here to stay. We're not creating a need, we're solving a need."

The group will be based in Philadelphia and could include many if not all of the significant companies in the industry.

It will seek to highlight the clinics' attempt to make basic healthcare more convenient and thereby accessible, rather than be seen as merely a retailer of health services.

Some of the items on the industry group's agenda will be an attempt to establish and set out principles for the industry, ways to collaborate, and programmes to ensure consistent quality.

Clinic companies also say they have been recently welcomed by large US healthcare insurers, which are increasingly arranging to pay for their patients' visits to such low-cost, walk-in clinics.

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