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## Medical clinics finding a home in stores With convenience comes limitations

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After keeping his wife up all night with his coughing, Stephen Leischner decided to visit a clinic at his neighborhood Kroger one Sunday.

While his wife shopped, a nurse practitioner examined Leischner and prescribed a cough suppressant.

"I figured I could wait until Monday and try to see my doctor, or I could go to the clinic," said Leischner, 62, who was treated in May at The Little Clinic at the Hikes Point Kroger.

"The nurse was very professional, knowledgeable and thorough. I was able to use my insurance card and fill a prescription right away. She spent more time with me that visit than my doctor normally does."

Leischner was taking advantage of a growing industry designed to provide inexpensive, convenient care for consumers with minor illnesses. In the past few years, hundreds of clinics have opened in groceries, pharmacies and other retail stores across the nation.

In Kentuckiana, The Little Clinic began operations three years ago under the name FastCare and now has clinics in six Kroger stores in the Louisville and Lexington areas. Earlier this year, the company announced plans to have more than 200 nationally in two or three years.

Norton Healthcare, meanwhile, is considering "retail clinics," and Kentucky state officials are looking into whether to regulate them.

Proponents say they offer quick, inexpensive care for ailments like strep throat, ear infections or rashes.

They are open past normal business hours and are usually staffed by nurse practitioners, who can write prescriptions. The staff generally has a relationship with a doctor in the community, and patients with potentially serious conditions can be referred to doctors, urgent-care centers or emergency rooms.

But critics say clinic staff might miss subtle symptoms of serious conditions, and they stress that these clinics are no substitute for regular care by a doctor.

"If you go to (a retail clinic) one day and an urgent-care center another day, no physician really knows what is happening," said Dr. Ramsey Nassar, a Louisville kidney specialist. "The patients sometimes don't think of the big picture. They think of the moment."

Critics and proponents agree that the rapid growth of these clinics points to serious flaws with the nation's health care system, such as rising costs and a shrinking number of family doctors. More than half a million Kentuckians have no health insurance, and nearly two-thirds of Kentucky counties are designated by the federal government as medically underserved for primary care.

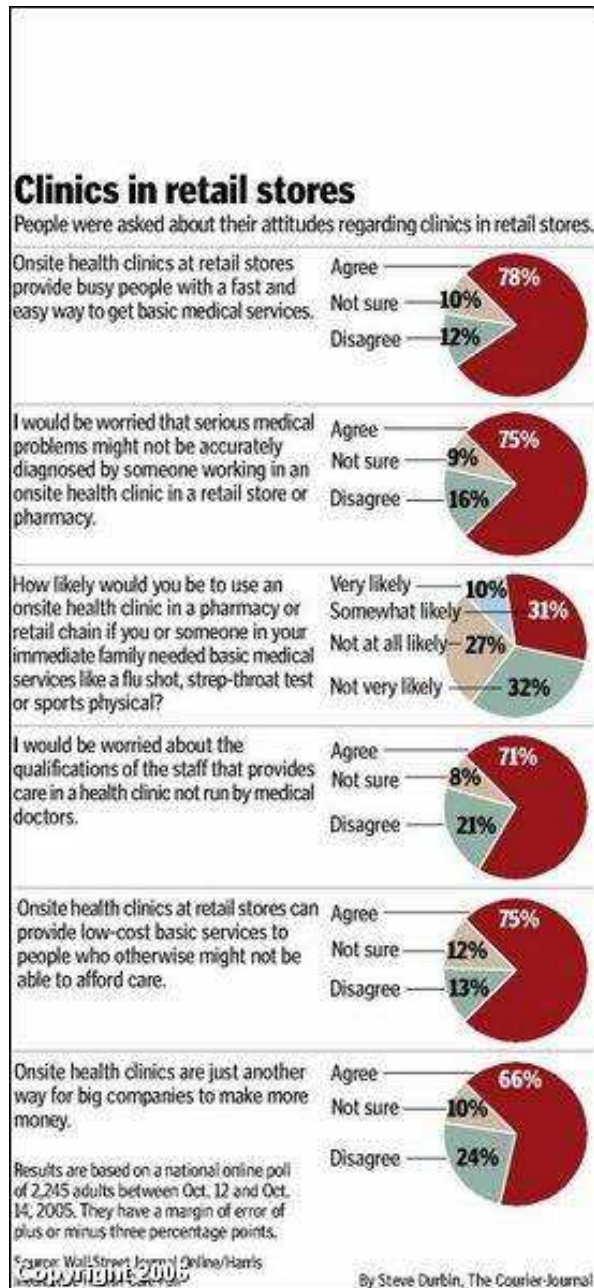
"Everybody knows the system is broken," said Dr. Jim "Woody" Woodburn, chief medical officer for Minneapolis-based MinuteClinic, which has 104 clinics in 15 states, including Indiana. "We are a solution to a very painful situation for families and patients." Answering a need

Operators and potential patients agree that retail clinics fill a niche.

"The concept is a good one. I'm in Kroger all the time anyway," said Bruce Gadansky, 62, of Prospect. "I'd give it a shot."

Ruby Morrison, 66, of Sellersburg, Ind., said people often need medical care during odd hours. "Children get sick on the weekends. So what are you going to do?"

Little Clinic officials wouldn't comment for this article, but their Web site touts their clinics as "convenient neighborhood medical care," open weekends and 8 a.m.- 8 p.m. on weekdays, excluding lunch hours.



**Checkups**, a New York-based company that plans to have 24 clinics in five states by January, has similar hours. Chief executive officer Jack Tawil said during busy times, waiting patients can carry a beeper around the store as they shop.

In addition to the convenience, Tawil said patients are also attracted by the prices. Clinics accept many insurance plans. Without insurance, a typical adult visit to Checkups, for example, costs \$65. And there are specials, such as school physicals for \$25.

Gadansky and Morrison said clinic prices might be especially attractive to those without insurance who might otherwise delay or skip seeing a doctor.

Clinics are expected to continue to pop up, partly because they fill a need for patients and partly because they dovetail nicely with retail stores' goals of offering more services.

"We just felt like it was a natural tie-in with our pharmacy operation," said Randy Gaither, assistant director of pharmacy for Kroger MidSouth, which rents space to The Little Clinic. "It's been a positive experience."  
Reservations remain

A recent Web survey by the Wall Street Journal Online and Harris Interactive showed that people understand the benefits of such clinics but are also skeptical about them, particularly about whether serious medical problems might be misdiagnosed.

Doctors stressed that they aren't worried about competition from these clinics but are simply concerned for their patients' welfare.

"I go there to get vaccines. I go there to get my blood pressure checked. But I don't know if they can do more than that," said Dr. Yacoub E. Yacoub, a retired anesthesiologist. "Beyond the incidental service, I don't think I would go."

Dr. Rick Kellerman, president of the American Academy of Family Physicians, said there's a place for these types of clinics, but they shouldn't try to be more than they are. The academy has a list of what it wants to see in retail clinics, such as a formal connection with community physicians and a referral system. "There should be a very limited scope of care," Kellerman said.

Clinic operators agreed. Woodburn, of MinuteClinic, said they don't treat headaches or abdominal pain because these could signal serious problems. Tawil said that his clinic nurses know their limits.

"Nurse practitioners are highly, highly qualified to give non-urgent care," he said. "If anything seems to be out of whack, it's automatically referred out."

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