

THE TAMPA TRIBUNE

Retail Redefines 'Checkout Line'

By MICHAEL SASSO *The Tampa Tribune*

Aug 30, 2006

TAMPA - At a recent nursing convention in Tampa, recruiters for The Little Clinic were working hard to lure nurse practitioners to their fledgling company, which sets up tiny clinics inside retail stores.

Health clinics inside Wal-Mart and Publix stores are a new animal, and recruiters must convince potential employees that the clinics are for real. To The Little Clinic's chagrin, though, a competing clinic company, Minneapolis-based MinuteClinic, was running the next booth over and trying to lure the same nurse practitioners.

"We looked at them, and they looked at us. We were right next to each other," said Abbey Foster, The Little Clinic's human resources director.

It was a bit awkward, she said, but never came to fisticuffs.

"No, not yet," she said, laughing.

In coming years, recruiters for in-store clinics may be tripping over one another regularly as several growing clinic companies make plans to open dozens - and possibly hundreds - of clinics inside Florida supermarkets and pharmacies. All the companies are chasing the same relatively small pool of nurse practitioners, who are advanced nurses able to prescribe medicine.

If such clinics take off, tens of thousands of additional Floridians could be treated by nurse practitioners, and fewer may head to their family doctor or emergency room.

Facing Challenges

One of many challenges facing this small niche industry, though, is whether it can find enough nurse practitioners to satisfy its lofty expansion plans. Also, will the nurses find the limited scope of an in-store clinic - which focuses just on routine illnesses - unrewarding and quit?

At the moment, several start-up clinic companies are recruiting nurse practitioners and searching for locations in Florida: The Little Clinic, MinuteClinic and a third retail clinic company, New York-based CheckUps. The Little Clinic, of Louisville, Ky., may have scored the biggest coup by signing a contract to open as many as 150 clinics inside Publix supermarkets over three years.

The Little Clinic originally was to open in Publix by June, but it has taken longer than expected to get permits for and build the tiny 150-square-foot clinics inside the supermarkets, said Little Clinic Chief Executive Officer Bill Hamburg. Plans are initially to open five in Orlando and five in Tampa-area Publix stores by late September, Hamburg said.

MinuteClinic, which recently was acquired by CVS, meanwhile has about 80 clinics nationwide including six in Orlando-area CVS stores. It hasn't revealed its expansion plans for Florida.

The only company operating in the Bay area is Quick Quality Care, which is changing its name to CheckUps. Locally, it runs a clinic inside the Wal-Mart supercenter at 19910 Bruce B. Downs Blvd. in New Tampa.

It's anybody's guess whether nurses will leave hospitals and doctors' offices for potentially greener pastures at Publix, CVS and Wal-Mart.

The American College of Nurse Practitioners estimates that the retail clinic industry eventually may require up to 10,000 nurse practitioners nationwide, said ACNP communications director Allison Beard. Most clinics require two full-time nurse practitioners.

Beard said there are about 150,000 nurse practitioners nationwide, which should be enough to satisfy everyone's needs. Whereas there is a nationwide shortage of nurses, the shortage isn't as significant among nurse practitioners, Beard said.

However, some of the clinic companies aren't so sure.

"Going forward, if the popularity of these clinics really takes off, the two challenges we all will have is finding qualified nurse practitioners and getting all of them [clinics] open fast enough to please our retail host," said The Little Clinic's Hamburg.

A Chance for Independence

For now, the clinic companies are putting on the full-court press to find employees. The Little Clinic, MinuteClinic and CheckUps are running help-wanted ads on the Florida Nurse Practitioner Network's job board, in Florida newspapers, attending nursing conventions and making contacts with nursing schools. The Little Clinic is offering the nurses about \$75,000 a year, which is the going rate for nurse practitioners in Florida, said The Little Clinic's Foster.

The chief selling point isn't the money, though, Foster said. In-store clinics offer nurse practitioners what she said many of them really want: an independent practice.

At The Little Clinic, the nurses will talk regularly with a local family physician, who will oversee up to five Little Clinics under a contract with the company. However, it will be the nurse practitioners - not the doctors - who staff the clinics, write the prescriptions, build rapport with patients and build the practice, Foster said.

Still, Vicki McMahon, a nurse practitioner with The Little Clinic who is helping the company recruit nurses, acknowledges that some nurse practitioners might find it limiting professionally. At a doctor's office, she would provide such advanced procedures as gynecological exams and monitoring a patient's cholesterol levels. However, in-store clinics strive for quick, inexpensive walk-in care, so they limit their scope to treating sinus infections, earaches and other minor ailments.

So far, Quick Quality Care nurse practitioner Susan Gryder is thrilled with the rapport she has built with patients inside the north Tampa Wal-Mart supercenter. She had been a nurse in a juvenile prison before joining the clinic inside Wal-Mart.

"It's nice to be in a clinic where the patients appreciate you," she said.

Reporter Michael Sasso can be reached at msasso@tampatrib.com or (813) 259-7865.