



NEWS

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Saint Luke's Health System launches new ePharmacy program

Program addresses staffing, cost, and safety needs

KANSAS CITY, Mo. – As the nation's hospitals struggle with the growing shortage of pharmacists, Saint Luke's Health System has devised an approach that not only addresses its staffing needs, but also saves money and increases patient safety to boot.

In December the health system launched its new ePharmacy program. ePharmacy utilizes state-of-the-art technology to provide overnight pharmacist coverage to several Saint Luke's facilities remotely. The ePharmacy team is located at the Summit Technology Center in Lee's Summit, Mo., where the health system's eICU center is also housed.

The program was launched with Saint Luke's East-Lee's Summit; Saint Luke's Northland Hospital (Barry Road and Smithville campuses); and Crittenton Children's Center. On Jan. 5, Hedrick Medical Center in Chillicothe and Wright Memorial Hospital in Trenton, Mo. – both members of Saint Luke's Health System – went live.

“Before the launch of ePharmacy, overnight pharmacy coverage was provided by the pharmacists at Saint Luke's South in Overland Park,” said Doug DeJong, senior director of Pharmacy. “As patient volumes and patient acuity levels grew, the work load warranted dedicated resources for that facility, and we began to look at options for the other campuses. In addition, we wanted to gain the capacity to be able to start expanding services to our system facilities outside the metro area.”

With the ePharmacy, physician orders are scanned to the pharmacist at the remote location. The pharmacist on duty reviews the orders and enters them into the computer system, screening for potential drug interactions and performing other clinical activities consistent with those performed when a pharmacist is on-site. Entering the order into the computer system allows nurses to remove the medication from automated dispensing cabinets at the hospital.

In addition to providing more timely service to patients, the ePharmacy program addresses a push by The Joint Commission – a national, non-profit standards-setting and accrediting body for health care organizations – for more pharmacist oversight of medication to help eliminate medication errors. This is particularly beneficial to Saint Luke’s regional facilities that traditionally have less on-site pharmacist coverage.

It’s more cost efficient too. “Saint Luke’s can deploy this innovative project at a fraction of the cost associated with staffing at each system facility or purchasing outside services,” DeJong said. “The ePharmacy allows a central core of pharmacists to apply their skills in multiple locations, thus spreading the overhead costs over multiple facilities. And by monitoring system-wide activity in a medication order queue, ePharmacy can assist all sites during peak times and temporary staffing shortages, maximizing efficiency and workflow. This is especially beneficial as a recruitment tool for all campuses.”

Patients benefit as well. “It adds a layer of safety and quality for patient care by reducing medication errors through integration with monitoring, drug-dose checking, patient consultations, allergy screening, drug-interaction screening, therapeutic duplication, and drug-disease interactions,” DeJong continued. “By leveraging valuable pharmacist time, ePharmacy improves efficiency by freeing them for more active participation in clinical consultation with an objective of improving medication management.”

Now that phase I of the ePharmacy program has begun, the Saint Luke’s Health System Pharmacy Department is looking ahead. Future phases may include offering the service to other regional facilities outside Saint Luke’s Health System to generate revenue, and possibly expanding the service to 24/7.

The ePharmacy hours of operation are Monday through Friday, 9 p.m. – 7 a.m. and Saturday and Sunday 7 p.m. – 7 a.m. Each facility continues to be supported by an on-call pharmacist when the need arises.

Saint Luke’s Health System consists of 11 area hospitals and many primary care practices, and provides a range of inpatient, outpatient, and home care services. Founded as a faith-based, not-for-profit organization, our mission includes a commitment to the highest levels of excellence in health care and the advancement of medical research and education. The health system is an aligned organization in which the physicians and hospitals assume responsibility for enhancing the physical, mental, and spiritual health of people in the metropolitan Kansas City area and the surrounding region.

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