

## Automation; An Advancing Role in Community Pharmacy

The traditional task of community pharmacists lies in providing their patients with the required medication; but yet the mechanics of this are renowned for being tedious and repetitive. This is, of course in addition to the realms of human error. However in the world of automation, pharmacists are finding solutions. Robots rarely make errors, they don't get bored or distracted. Furthermore, they give pharmacists and technicians the glorious gift of time, valuable time with their patients and customers for more profitable clinical services.



Peter Weedle, Allcare Pharmacy  
Townview

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*Peter Weedle, Pharmacist,  
Allcare Pharmacy  
Mallow, Co. Cork*

Over the last few years, automation is becoming more widely embraced in Ireland. Irish Pharmacy News spoke to two local pharmacists about its use within their stores and businesses.

Peter Weedle Allcare Pharmacy is based in Mallow, Co. Cork and serves an urban and rural population and a number of nursing homes. The pharmacy was established over 40 years ago and has been using dispensing robots for the past 12 years.

“As our nursing home business and MDS for the community

were continuing to increase, it became clear that we needed to organise and streamline our filling of Medinox trays if we were to continue to grow,” Peter says.

“We were familiar with the benefits of automation, as we had many years’ experience with an BD Arx Speedcase in our main dispensary. However, we wanted to automate as much of the MDS tray production as possible.

### Increased Efficiency

“We considered the various systems on the market and for patient preference we wanted

“We went to see the system in a Medicare pharmacy in Northern Ireland and were very impressed with their set-up. We particularly liked the safety features in the system which showed that a lot of thought and care had gone into the development of the Synmed robot. The safety features were excellent, the recording of expiry dates and batch numbers for each medicine in each Medi-cup and the Synmed Assist which takes the operator step by step through the filling of each tray were particularly impressive.

“It is hard to know how we would cope without it now.”

### Extending Reach

Whelehans Pharmacy, a strong and robust customer led, independent, community pharmacy in Mullingar, has been serving the needs of the local population at its current location in the centre of town for over 100 years and recently celebrated their 120-year anniversary.

Pharmacist and Owner Eamonn Brady told us, “As the business has grown, especially since an extensive refit of our original Pearse St Mullingar Pharmacy in 2014 and opening a second pharmacy in Clonmore Mullingar in 2017, Whelehans has been at the forefront of many health led initiatives in town, providing a range of additional services at the current location, including a beautician clinic, chiroprapist,

to stay with our existing MDS – Medinox. We chose a SynMed® XF robot because they had a strong track-record of serving pharmacy with many installations in Canada, USA and the UK.



holistic therapy service, pet advice clinic, counselling service and more.

“Rather than grow through the philosophy of pile it high and have a primarily ‘sales focused’ pharmacy business, the core of our philosophy at Whelehans Pharmacy has been to place our pharmacy firmly at the centre of the community and to extend our reach through engagement ‘outside the front door’ so to speak.

“By doing this, Whelehans has become known in Mullingar and the wider Westmeath and Midlands area as a centre of excellence for health and beauty and with a highly trained and motivated team that not only have expertise, but the desire to treat everyone who enters the pharmacy as a ‘person’ with specific needs that we hope to resolve or help rather than just seeing them as a ‘customer’ who we try to ‘squeeze’ money out of.”

Specialising in dispensing to Nursing Homes, in order to maximise efficiencies Eamonn took the plunge to develop his

automation offering. Looking at the possibilities open to him, he pursued the route of a Synmed® robot.

This versatile automation helps pharmacists accurately prepare patients’ medication by filling 30 multi-dose blister packs/hour with hundreds of different tablet types.

“The Synmed® robot means efficiencies in dispensing time and accuracy. Most of our nursing homes are dispensed in blister packs and the preparing and dispensing or blister packs is the biggest time constraint in my pharmacy.

“The Synmed® robot can dispense on average 30 blister packs per hour. It also maximises the use of space within the pharmacy so it makes workflow a lot more efficient. Most importantly, it reduces errors in dispensing and checking so make dispensing a safer process.

**Low Error Rates**

“The Synmed® robot has the advantage of dispensing any type of blister pack; this has the

advance of not forcing one type of blister pack on any of the nursing homes we supply. In our case, we use 4 different type of blister pack system and the Synmed® robot can fill them all.

“From doing extensive research on the different types of robots on the market, I found Synmed® offer the biggest advantage of not restricting the way we dispense for our nursing home clients

“It has the advantage of a low error rate and it actually spots errors for pharmacy staff. It also has a system of making the checking of the medicines more efficient, quicker and safer so it maximises the use of the pharmacist’s time.”

Eamonn carried out his research, speaking to a number of pharmacists in the UK who are using the Synmed® robot with excellent feedback on how it benefited their business in all cases.

“I worked out that the Synmed® robot will pay itself pack in 3 years through staff efficiencies,” he adds.

Automation is making community

pharmacies more efficient and increased efficiency is giving them the opportunity to offer more services and provide greater medication safety. Pharmacies are under increasing pressure from issues like budget cuts, the aging population and medicine shortages. These all pose challenges to pharmacy management teams, including increased responsibilities, reduced time to spend with customers and limited storage space. Therefore, it’s crucial that pharmacists consider the benefits of incorporating new technology to increase efficiency.

Eamonn is quick to urge his colleagues to adopt the technology.

“If you are restricted for space or thinking of taking on more staff to meet increased dispensing demands, then you should consider robotic dispensing,” he says.

“When you pick a space in the pharmacy to place the robot, to maximise workflow efficiencies, ensure your top 400 dispensing lines are within easy reach of the robot.

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The SynMed®ULTRA and the SynMed XF® are our state-of-the-art automated dispensing systems designed to help pharmacies of any size increase capacity and boost productivity without compromising on quality.

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Eamonn Brady, Whelehan's Pharmacy, Mullingar

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*Eamonn Brady,  
Pharmacist,  
Whelehan's Pharmacy*

“It is important to brief staff in advance that the automation will increase efficiencies, allow the business grow more efficiently and secure growth and jobs in the future. Sometimes there can be a fear of change and fear the robot is going to ‘replace staff’.

“It is also best to have two staff in the pharmacy trained as ‘experts’ in using the robot; this way they can be the “go to people” for the other staff with questions on using the robot. I would advise you choose two staff who are open to change and have a good ability to mentor and explain to other

staff. With Synmed®, they send their trainer Mandy to train two staff for a week before the system goes live.

#### **Business Growth**

“Every pharmacist owner I spoke to who embraced robotic dispensing found that it enabled business growth and freed up many of the mundane jobs so staff could do what they do best, concentrate on the customer to give a better service and actually served to secure jobs and in many case, actually take on new people.”

Peter advises that automation of the dispensing process will continue to develop, and now is the time to get on board.

“The combination of our Medinnox MDS system with a Synmed robot allows us to prepare individualised medicine administration medicine cups for the patient and as therapy continues to develop and become more complicated it will increase the demand for the service that we offer,” he says.

“The overall distribution of medicines is going to become more centralised due to automation with pharmacists

spending less of their time on the packing process and more on the pharmaceutical care of their patients.”

Pharmacy robots allow technicians and pharmacists to spend less time manually finding prescriptions and more time with patients. Freeing up space, reducing dispensing errors and reducing patient waiting times are just some of the ways that automated dispensing systems are changing pharmacies in Ireland.

## **Anti-Vaccination Misinformation**

Minister for Health, Simon Harris TD, has met with the social media companies, Facebook, Twitter, and Google, to discuss the measures they are taking to combat anti-vaccination misinformation on social media platforms.

Vaccine hesitancy has been identified by the World Health Organization as one of the ten leading threats to global health in 2019.

The Minister outlined his concerns saying, “The progress we have made in reducing, and in some cases eradicating, vaccine-preventable diseases will be in vain if we allow our immunisation programmes to be undermined by

misinformation and disinformation about the benefits and safety of vaccines, particularly on social media.

“Social media is an incredibly powerful tool that can also be harnessed to direct people to sources of factual information about vaccination, so they can make informed decisions. It is in this context that I met with the social media companies today.

The Minister commended the social media companies for being proactive and putting in place measures to tackle this issue and he welcomed their commitment to work with the Department of Health to make further progress.”

However, he added, “The companies themselves acknowledged they have a responsibility to their users in the area of public health. While some

of them have taken measures to combat vaccine misinformation, they acknowledged there was much more work to be done and agreed to liaise with the department regarding the work of the Vaccine Alliance and with the HSE to progress further initiatives.

“We must do everything we can to ensure people get accurate and reputable information on public health.”