

## Telehealth's next move may be a foray into social media

BY AMANDA BALTAZAR

This is the age of interoperability. More than ever, the devices we own, be they a cell phone, a computer or a blood pressure monitor, are talking to each other and making the information they hold accessible not only to ourselves, but anyone with whom we choose to share it. This means managing medications, or simply old age, is becoming possible remotely, via telehealth.

These new technologies also mean that pharmacists are able to take a more active role in patients' day-to-day health, combining medication management therapy with health readings for more comprehensive disease management.

One company that's excelling in this field is A&D Medical, which sells a wireless blood pressure monitor, a wireless scale and a wireless activity monitor (a type of advanced pedometer). These products were launched at the end of last year and are all sold at major retail chains. Consumers can take measurements from these devices anywhere, then upload the data to their home computer, said Jeff Fox, A&D's product marketing manager.

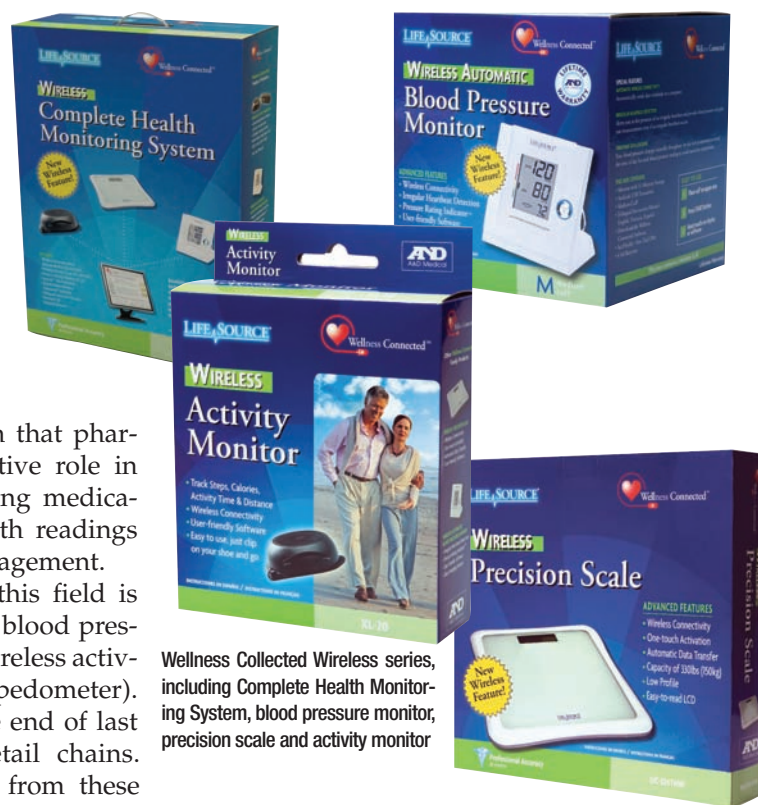


LifeSource's Wireless Complete Health Monitoring System

"One of the reinforcing elements of this product line is that [users] can share this information with others. They can directly access it, or there's a community feature so users have the ability to connect with a group," Fox said.

To further enhance this idea of community, the company is working on a social media element, tying its products in with such Web sites as Facebook, MySpace and Twitter, so users can share notes and results, but this project only is in its infancy. Another future endeavor could be an iPhone app.

Kevin Barenblat, president of Context Optional,



Wellness Collected Wireless series, including Complete Health Monitoring System, blood pressure monitor, precision scale and activity monitor

a social marketing company, said he expects iPhone use to continue to accelerate. Already, consumers are using these devices — and their accompanying apps — for such health benefits as weight loss, exercise and smoking cessation because they are so convenient. In the future, pharmaceutical and device companies will likely jump on the bandwagon, though he anticipated some government regulation surrounding this, he said.

A&D Medical's Fox only sees growth for these types of products: "The current administration is very much a proponent of medical record-keeping. As the government is supporting it, this market will grow and take on more entities, and we think the phone will be on the forefront of this."

To regulate this industry, Continua Health Care is working to develop industry standards so all products can interact with each other. In fact, in June, the company released guidelines, providing access to its technology standards for both members and nonmembers. The company's 213 members include healthcare and government organizations, as well as technology companies.

Continua's certification requires that devices link up in three categories: health and wellness; chronic disease management; and aging independently.

The benefits of telehealth extend beyond the consumer to the pharmacist, said Charles Parker, executive director of Continua. "MTM is one of the biggest benefits, and [these products]

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## Innovation frees up pharmacists

As patients expect more from their pharmacies, and pharmacists are keen to get back to the model of working more closely with patients, time needs to be freed up in the drug store pharmacy. A simple way of doing this is through the introduction of a central fill facility. Taking the work of prescriptions out of the pharmacy allows the pharmacist to focus on customer service and MTM duties; cuts stores' inventories; eliminates out-of-stock drugs; and improves accuracy — and thus, patient safety.

PharmASSIST from Innovation Associates allows pharmacies to move easily to a central fill system. Innovation works with more than 1,200 pharmacies nationwide, including Costco, which implemented the system in 2000, and Swedish Hospital in Seattle.

Central fill systems show benefits across the board. The operational costs of filling prescriptions are reduced by 50% to 100%, according to Doyle Jensen, EVP of Innovation, and labor can be cut in half.

There are several companies offering central fill technology, but Innovation offers certain features that the others don't. To begin with, its PharmASSIST is the most technologically advanced system, capable of filling up to 60,000 prescriptions per eight-hour shift. The typical pharmacist can fill only a fraction of that, or close to 350 prescriptions daily. Each prescription is filled by the advanced RDS Robotx, which uses the regular orange vials patients are accustomed to seeing, so they have no idea their prescriptions are not being filled on-site at their neighborhood pharmacy. Orders are delivered back to the pharmacy within 24 hours. Any rush prescriptions or one-time fills are typically still done in the drug store, which means, Doyle said, that only 30% to 40% of scripts are filled off-site, but that's enough to make a huge difference to a pharmacist's workload.

PharmASSIST has a much smaller footprint than other systems. It requires less than 2,000 sq. ft., and can be customized to any space, any volume of incoming prescriptions, and to work with any number of employees. It also uses the latest RFID technology to track each vial of drugs and ensure it's delivered to the correct destination.

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## Innovation

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What isn't dependent on technology however, are

the final safety tests, which are performed by a human pharmacist after each vial has been filled, ensuring patient safety is paramount.

It's also easy for humans to check any part of the system, Doyle said. "The systems are very intelligent and have a central monitor that

allows pharmacists to look at everything going on."

WellDyneRx, a mail-order pharmacy, installed the PharmASSIST program

in 2006. "We provided Innovation with the necessary data and specific objectives we were looking to achieve," said Mike Woodley, VP national pharmacy operations.

"[Innovation's team] asked questions, did an in-depth analysis and came back with various recommendations for layouts and workflow, which we then analyzed and selected the best solution for our requirements," he said.

"The Rx tracking capability is invaluable, especially when members call in wanting to know where their order is or to cancel an order in process," Woodley continued.

Since WellDyneRx implemented PharmASSIST, it has doubled its prescription output and increased monitoring for patient safety. Most prescriptions are also delivered within 24 hours, although the company's standard turnaround guarantee is 48 hours.

## EHR

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assumed to be accurate by healthcare professionals, nor can they rely upon it to make professional decisions," Hill noted.

When prescription data is integrated with the EHR, it provides the highest degree of patient safety, according to the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. More and more prescriptions will be available electronically as EHRs continue to replace the medical clipboard — a move encouraged by \$44.7 billion in incentives provided by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. PDX Inc, for example, reported that as of June, more than 4,500 pharmacies — representing more than 65 million patients and almost 1 billion prescriptions — have implemented its electronic healthcare record technology.

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