

Kiosks find acceptance in the waiting room

P&P Data Systems works with clinics in Ontario.

BY DIANNE CRAIG

You've seen them at the airport, and in movie theatres, grocery stores, hotels and shopping malls. Kiosks are everywhere, and now they're moving into healthcare clinics, enabling fast, easy check-ins, reducing wait times and freeing front desk staff to focus more on patient care.

P&P Data Systems of Toronto offers a self-registration kiosk to work with its Clinic Information System (CIS), which manages clinics through registration, scheduling, billing, laboratory and other modules. The Check-in Kiosk was launched a year ago and is now operating in clinics in Brampton, Guelph, Toronto and the Ottawa region.

The company's president, Moshe Pinhas, describes the kiosk as similar to one at an airport. "The patient uses a touch screen or health card reader to check in. It will do all the background checking noting whether there is something the staff wants to alert the patient about, and validate their health card." It integrates with the CIS calendaring system, says Pinhas, and it can track how long a patient has been waiting. Patients are prompted to update their contact information. Once a patient checks in using the kiosk, the CIS calendar listing the appointment stamps the time of registration and changes colour to alert reception the patient has registered.

Pinhas says the kiosk is designed to "move the clinic's staff up the value chain so they're not spending all their time checking people in. We're now seeing a staff shortage in administrative positions. The kiosk allows doctors to use their staff more productively."

Marketed to current users of P&P's CIS as an add-on module, the kiosk is available in a floor standing or wall mounted unit but it can also be mounted on a desktop. Pinhas

says it takes about two hours to configure and customize the Check-in Kiosk.

Asked about other healthcare kiosks on the market, Pinhas says the only one he has seen in Ontario with presence in stand-alone practices or ambulatory care is one he describes as 'pretty cool' by Medisolve. "Medisolve leads the patient through a decision tree that is custom made for the clinic to determine all the details around the patient's complaint before the visit. It's probably where we are going in the future."

The busy West Carleton Family Health Team, a family practice northwest of Ottawa, has eight physicians, 19 other staff members, and 11,000 patients. It receives about 600 phone calls a day. According to Clinic Manager Dave Sellers, they have been 'fully electronic' for five years.

The clinicians installed the kiosk, priced at \$7,500 - including software and hardware, anticipating significant benefits. "We

During the first year, about 20 per cent of West Carleton patients opted to use it. Now, that volume has jumped to 40 to 50 per cent, according to Sellers, who says patients find it very easy to use.

Among the benefits West Carleton has observed are shorter wait times.

"It's like an employee that keeps working every day and never asks for a raise," jokes Sellers. "If we didn't have a kiosk, we'd have to have three people at the desk handling patients," he says.

Asked whether they have had any issues with the operation of the kiosk, Sellers said, "There have always been issues with the kiosk, but it does work. We subscribe to the health card validation, but it locks up... something to do with the server and finding the appropriate protocol to bypass it. So we turned that off" Now the clinic runs the bulk of health card validations nightly, using CIS, before a scheduled appointment. The software flags the invalid cards. Sellers blames the "dumb healthcards - even the new ones" - for sometimes not scanning well. Overall, he is happy with the kiosk.

According to Pinhas, there is either a hardware or internet problem at West Carleton. He says, "Health card validation works on all of our sites. What West Carleton did is set the validation to occur overnight. That way, if a patient comes in with an invalid health card the system informs them to go to reception."

The Brameast Family Physicians family health network (FHN), located near Brampton, Ont., also has a P&P kiosk in the lobby and hasn't experienced any problems with its health card validation function. Brameast has 11 physicians and between 12,000-15,000 active patients. The clinic had been using P&P Data's CIS since 1999 for appointment booking

and billing functions. It implemented an EMR in July, 2005 and is now using many more CIS modules.

Like West Carleton, Brameast Family Physicians installed the kiosk to become more efficient. "We can have at least 300 patients a day," says Marissa Fernandez, Business Manager for Brameast. "The



Swiping a healthcare card at the check-in kiosk

thought it was a good idea. We bought it to allow people to check in and thus relieve staff of that process," says Sellers. "We have two people on the front desk and about 150 a day checking in." The kiosk quickly proved to be cost-effective, says Sellers, who adds the check-in process now goes "much faster and better."

kiosk makes everything run smoother. When patients arrive they can check themselves in and the people on the front desk don't have to interrupt a call," she adds. When the clinic is busy, she notes, patients line up at the kiosk instead of at the desk.

Fernandez says both the physicians and patients were receptive to the kiosk installation early on. She estimates about 50 percent of Brameast patients swipe their cards in the lobby Check-in Kiosk and 20 percent key in information on the screen.

"Accessing information is only as good as he patient reading the screen," points out Fernandez. "They need to wait for the confirmation screen saying yes, they're checked in and should take a seat," she says, adding that if the screen says 'go to the front desk' for some reason and they don't wait for that last screen, they may take a seat and miss the request.

Fernandez suggested she would like the kiosk to have a secure way of identifying someone who requests an address change. "A PIN number assigned to the patient for example," she suggests.

There have actually been instances where estranged husbands have used it to find family members with just the patient's full name and birth date.

"We don't use the kiosk to its maximum capabilities," admits Fernandez. One option left unused is a setting designed to track wait times. At present, neither West Carleton nor Brameast uses the kiosk's

The kiosk is available in wall or desktop-mounted models or a floor standing unit.

language option since both practices' patients speak English. The language feature lets patients choose from five languages - English, French, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish - to interact with the kiosk. Pinhas says P&P may soon add Cantonese, Mandarin and Hindi.

"There is a lot of demand for the kiosk

to do more," Pinhas adds, and references displays like a depression scale, and other indicators of how a patient is doing with a chronic disease. P&P is working on that now, says Pinhas.

Kiosks in waiting rooms ask questions such as 'why are you here today?' with five to ten of the most common responses listed. Adds Pinhas, "If the appointment is a follow-up, it might as 'Is your condition improving?', and 'Are you taking medication as directed?'"

For longer, more confidential interviews, he says, there could be separate exam room stations where patients could enter more triage information. The most common request P&P receives concerns depression scales. Patients need a setting where they feel comfortable entering confidential data.

The types of healthcare groups or departments suitable for using the Check-in Kiosk are "almost limitless." It would work well virtually "any place looking to keep costs under control and to improve workflow," according to Pinhas.