

BEHIND | THE DESK

Risks to **Public Health**, **Patient Privacy**, and **Drug Security** under Walgreens' New Pharmacy Model.

New Research Shows Patient Privacy and Other Problems Persist in Walgreens' Well Experience Pharmacies Months After They Were First Exposed.

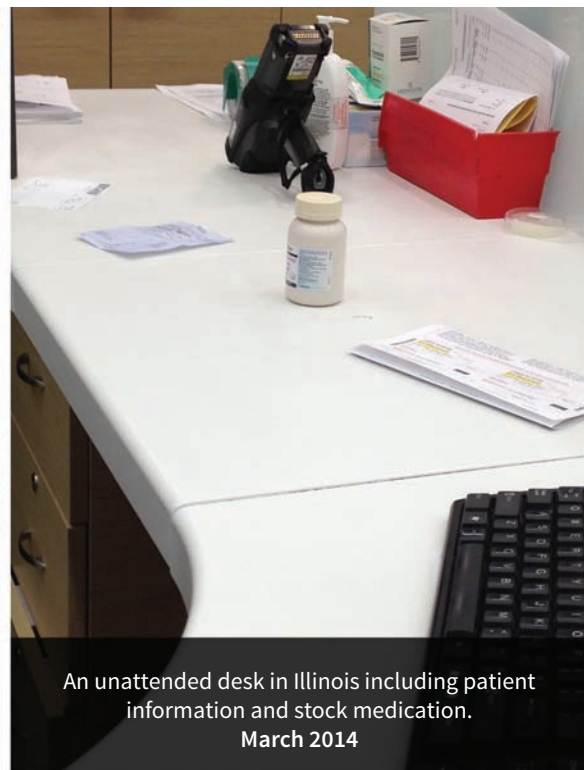
In September 2013, Change to Win (CtW) Retail Initiatives released an investigative report about Walgreens' "Well Experience" pharmacy model that detailed serious design and staffing problems at the new pharmacy format. Using data gathered from 100 visits to 50 Well Experience pharmacies in Florida, Illinois and Indiana, the report, titled *Behind the Desk*, exposed widespread patient privacy violations, inadequately secured prescription medications and low rates of patient counseling.

The Well Experience format removes the pharmacist from the traditional pharmacy work area and places him or her at a public facing desk in front of the pharmacy counter. CtW's report found that this change increases distractions and interruptions—which are associated with medication errors. The model also makes it difficult for pharmacists to fulfill their duties of supervising technicians and verifying the accuracy of prescription fills.

For the past several months, Walgreens' Well Experience has faced scrutiny from regulators and patient advocates, and new research by CtW shows that problems identified in the initial study persist despite Walgreens' assurance that it has continually made improvements to the model.



An unattended desk in Illinois including patient information and prescription medication in a bin.
June 2013



An unattended desk in Illinois including patient information and stock medication.
March 2014

New Data Shows Widespread Problems Remain in Well Experience Stores

Between November 2013 and March 2014, CtW conducted a follow-up investigation of Walgreens' Well Experience pharmacies. In 52 visits to 26 Walgreens stores in Arizona, Illinois and Indiana, researchers found that patient privacy violations and inadequate medication security are still occurring at high rates at Well Experience locations.

In **73 percent** of the stores CtW surveyed, private patient health information was left unattended and visible to the public. Nearly **46 percent** of stores had prescription medications unattended, often with sensitive patient information attached, and often within reach of Walgreens customers in the pharmacy.

TYPE OF VIOLATION	SURVEY 1 06/2013 - 08/2013	SURVEY 2 11/2013 - 03/2014
Patient Privacy Breaches — unattended sensitive, legally protected patient information including information about patients' prescriptions and medical histories.	80%	73%
Inadequately secured prescription medication — unattended prescription drugs on or near the pharmacists' desks, within the reach of customers in the pharmacy waiting area.	46%	46%

CtW's observations suggest that pharmacy staffing may be a primary reason that materials were left unattended on the out-in-front desk. Generally, only one pharmacist is on duty at a time and is responsible for providing an expanding set of clinical services and supervising the technicians behind the counter. Additionally, there are certain tasks that, by law, only pharmacists may perform and which must be done behind the counter, such as the retrieval of controlled substances from locked cabinets.

In the stores visited, the most common reason pharmacists left the desk was to go behind the pharmacy counter. During CtW's observations, **pharmacists left the desk an average of once about every 15 minutes and, on some visits, desks containing protected health information (PHI) or medication were unattended for ten or more minutes at a time.** On one visit, PHI was left unattended on a desk for 25 minutes while the pharmacist worked behind the counter.

Walgreens continues to build Well Experience desks with the inadequate privacy protections featured in CtW's initial report. CtW researchers noted that privacy filters continued to be missing from some pharmacists' computer and iPad screens.

Walgreens Faces Regulatory Scrutiny

Since CtW released its initial report in September, the model has faced scrutiny from federal and state regulators, legislators and advocacy organizations. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Service's Office of Civil Rights launched an investigation into HIPAA violations at Well Experience pharmacies. U.S. Senator Ed Markey has called on the Walgreens to protect patient privacy at Well Experience locations. National privacy organizations including Patient Privacy Rights and the Center for Democracy and Technology have also criticized Walgreens' inadequate privacy protections.

A number of state boards of pharmacy have raised concerns about the model. One member of the California pharmacy board said aspects of the model's workflow could "really open the door to a lot of prescription errors." At the same California meeting, a Walgreens representative admitted the CtW report documented violations of pharmacy board regulations. Several boards have effectively prohibited the model or required significant modifications.

Walgreens Should Reevaluate Well Experience

Walgreens says that the Well Experience model can expand patient counseling and the pharmacist's role in healthcare. However, the problems identified by CtW's investigations, along with concerns raised by state pharmacy boards and regulators, raise questions about whether Walgreens' Well Experience model can provide expanded pharmacy services without compromising patient privacy and safety.

Walgreens and state boards of pharmacy should undertake a systematic re-evaluation of the model to ensure that by carrying out its plan to "revolutionize" the pharmacy, Walgreens does not interfere with pharmacists' ability to perform their core duties in a manner that protects patient privacy and safety.