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Add It To Your Shopping List: Health Care

By Sarah McIntosh

It's Saturday morning, you wake up with a sore throat, you know it, you can tell, it's definitely strep throat. But it's Saturday and your doctor's office is closed and a sore throat isn't something you want to visit the emergency room for. The awful truth: you know you will have to spend the entire weekend feeling worse and worse with a hope that Monday morning you will be able to talk your doctor's office into finding an appointment for you.

But another option might be right around the corner, literally. Across the nation in-store health clinics are opening in pharmacies, Wal-Marts, Targets, and grocery stores. Such clinics are rapidly grown in numbers with estimates of 1,500 to 1,800 clinics opening by the end of 2008.

These clinics offer an alternative avenue for care for both the insured and uninsured in the United States. As policymakers debate how to approach the concerns of the uninsured in the United States, they should acknowledge the advantages offered by these private sector clinics and make sure not to stifle these innovations.

In-store clinics offer both acute and preventative care. The acute care options are for diagnosis and treatment of basic cases such as strep throat, sinus infections, earaches, bladder infections, and more. Preventative services are generally available for blood sugar testing, cholesterol screening, routine physicals, and vaccinations.

Clinics offer price transparency by posting a list of services and prices for patients to see ahead of time. This is especially helpful for the uninsured who may be paying more than a co-pay.

The convenience of these clinics makes them an attractive option. They are open extended hours, weekends, and sometimes holidays. Most have a pager system so that instead of passing time in a waiting-room, people can shop. An added bonus is that once the nurse practitioner, or physician, writes a prescription, the patient can have it filled right there in the store---making it truly a one-stop venture.

In-store clinics are able to operate in a market where government-run clinics would suffer a loss. It would be difficult for public sector clinics to recover start-up costs. Currently, the average clinic takes one to three years to become profitable. But a company such as Wal-Mart can afford to invest in a clinic they know may take some time to become profitable. Also, their

overhead costs are offset because of their locations.

Rather than encouraging individuals to make health care decisions for themselves, governments often want to expand their own programs and create a system where they tell people what they need. But consumer-driven options, such as private sector clinics provide people who perhaps could not afford insurance or a trip to the emergency room, an alternative avenue of treatment they may be able to afford.

Overall, in-store clinics offer a viable, convenient avenue for basic health care concerns. Policymakers should acknowledge them and encourage them in their communities, making sure not to create barriers to their entry.

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