



North Coast Physician

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Cover Photo

"AVOSET 1"

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Another One Bites the Dust

Stephen Kamelgarn, M.D.

I was quite distressed when I learned of the announcement by Lima's Pharmacy that the pharmacy would be closing as of February 1. This upsets me personally because Lima's has been my "personal" pharmacy for more than twenty-five years. In these long years I've gotten to know the pharmacy personnel, and while they aren't friends, I do feel a kinship with them, and I almost always had a smile when I had to conduct business with them. Now, after a quarter-of-a-century, I have to find a new pharmacy for my medication needs.

Yes, I know that they will continue with compounding medications for special cases, but, for all intents and purposes, the pharmacy will be closed to the general public.

On a larger level, Lima's closing has broader implications. There will no longer be any small, "family" pharmacies in Eureka. All of our local medications will now be filled by "big box" pharmacies: two CVS, two Walgreens, Costco, Walmart, Rite-Aid, Safeway, and Target. Yes, there's also the new Open Door Rx, but that pharmacy is only available to patients enrolled in the Open Door System.

By having the last independent pharmacy close in Eureka, we, as patients, have lost another valuable option for health care. There are a number of reasons that this is a bad thing. Small, independent pharmacies have a lot of good things going for them, not offered by the big box pharmacies:

1. Personalized Customer Service:

It's no secret that locally owned businesses (of any kind) are more likely to have great customer service, and pharmacies are no exception.

Because independent pharmacies are not bound to the same bottom lines as corporate pharmacies, their pharmacists and staff

have more time and energy to treat customers as individuals rather than numbers.

As one becomes a regular customer at a local pharmacy, the pharmacist will learn their name, remember them as they walk in, and provide friendly, personalized service. This is a reassuring benefit for people with chronic illness or pain and recurring prescriptions. It affords the customer confidence that the pharmacist will keep these in mind when filling a one-time prescription.

According to a study by Consumer Reports, more than 50% of patients who filled prescriptions at an independent pharmacy said that their pharmacist knew them by name – in contrast to only 14% at chain pharmacies.

2. Convenience: It's hard to deny the convenience factor that chain pharmacies provide. With a Walgreens on practically every street corner, how can an independent pharmacy possibly match their level of convenience?

The answer is by offering a variety of prescription pick-up and delivery options. Independent pharmacies may be outnumbered in most states, and they may have tighter hours of operation windows, but they also have the flexibility and willingness to deliver medications to their community members – a flexibility that chains simply do not have.

Free delivery is something that is out of the question with chain pharmacies, but that is not the case with local pharmacies. If a loyal customer needs a prescription delivered, a local pharmacist can do so. This was especially true of Lima's, that maintained a medication delivery service for years. When Cloney's was in business, they offered the same service; but Cloney's has been closed for more than a year.

3. Affordability: If there is one benefit that big box pharmacies should be able to claim, it's affordability.

Large corporations, by nature, have the advantage of size and scale, which in turn allows them to offer lower prices than their independent counterparts. But, interestingly enough, in the pharmacy industry size rarely equates to lower costs for patients.

Many independent, local pharmacies have a lower profit margin, allowing them to offer lower prices when needed. Pharmacists may be flexible with the pricing of expensive medications if one is struggling to cover the expense. They may also offer cash-pay options if that is beneficial rather than going through one's insurance.

Another insightful study from Consumer Reports (1) found that independent pharmacies, on average, are able to (and often do) offer lower prices on medication than chains. Pricing varies, of course, from pharmacy to pharmacy, but the willingness of most local pharmacies to have lower profit margins on medication sets them apart from the big boxes.

4. Accuracy & Efficiency: Another misconception with locally owned businesses is that they are less efficient than their corporate counterparts. But when we look at independent pharmacies, this is not always true.

Smaller, local pharmacies often have shorter wait times and shorter lines in the store. This may be due in part to chain pharmacies being understaffed and workers being overwhelmed, creating long lines and long wait times for phone calls. This is especially true during times of vaccines for flu and viruses and in high traffic times of each day.

"Lima's", Continued on Pg. 11

“Lima’s”, Continued From Pg. 5

Consumer Reports (2) also set out to test the differences in wait-times between independent and chain pharmacies, and the results were staggering. Not only did they find that independent pharmacies have significantly lower wait times, but independent pharmacies also provided a much greater number of one-on-one consultations. In a world as confusing as health-care, the importance of personal pharmacist interaction cannot be understated.

In the same Consumer Reports study, it was also reported that only 3% of patients who shopped at local pharmacies said they had to wait “a long time” to get service. This is compared to the 18% of patients at chain pharmacies who said they had to wait a long time.

In effect, shorter wait times mean faster service and easier access to one’s pharmacist. Less time in line also means more time doing the things that one enjoys.

Unlike chain pharmacies that are overworking their pharmacy staff and are inundated with prescription requests, smaller pharmacies offer reliability and accuracy with prescription fills. Without the corporate pressure and constant customer turnover, the local pharmacist can make sure that prescriptions are filled accurately.

Compared to chain pharmacies, independents are less likely to make miscalculations, mix up prescriptions, or wrongly file patient information. As a result, when one chooses an independent, they can be confident that one has access to closely-monitored, thoroughly-reviewed care.

In theory, chain pharmacies should be able to have greater efficiency. But in reality, their decision to under-staff locations for the sake of saving money has resulted in the complete opposite.

5. Support small business: By shopping at and utilizing a local pharmacy, one is supporting a small business and their community. Chain pharmacies do not necessarily support the economy of the town or city where they are located.

According to the National Community Pharmacists Association (NCPA),
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pendent pharmacy owners and employees make significant contributions to their communities: (3)

65% of owners/employees support at least 5 community organizations

32% support more than 10 community organizations

50% provide more than \$4,000 in financial support to local organizations

58% of owners/employees are members of their local Chamber of Commerce

16% are members of a local business association

3% hold an elected position in local or state office.

6. Patient education: Local pharmacists have the time and the patience to provide more than just the information covering one’s prescription. Local pharmacists build rapport with customers and can discuss health and wellness topics that a chain pharmacist might brush off. The extra time and care provided at a local pharmacy make a huge difference in customer education and relations.

7. Vaccine Administration: Another recent study found that independent pharmacies have been much more efficient at administering COVID-19 vaccines than chains. Although the federal government partnered with CVS and Walgreens to distribute vaccines, two states which have turned to independent pharmacies for vaccine rollout – West Virginia and North Dakota – are reporting the highest percentage of vaccine administration.

Between January and March of 2021, pharmacies like CVS and Walgreens wasted nearly 180,000 doses of the vaccine due to poor planning. With numbers like this, patients should think critically about whether or not chains can offer them the specific care they need. The lack of efficiency by CVS and Walgreens to administer doses has been so poor that states like Maine have begun transferring the doses intended for these chains to independent pharmacies.(4)

While I may find that switching pharmacies to one of the big box pharmacies to

be nothing more than a temporary minor inconvenience, I feel that Lima’s closing is more emblematic of a larger trend in the delivery of health care in our small, isolated community. We’ve seen it in the marked decrease in private practitioners as we’ve witnessed the rise of two corporate medical care entities in Eureka: Providence/St Jo’s and The Open Door System. Almost every physician in Eureka practices under the rubric of one of those two systems.

The loss of alternatives when it comes to health care reflects a national trend of “consolidation” in almost every aspect of our lives. We’ve seen the loss of local businesses as Amazon has taken over so much retail traffic. Drive along Fourth and Fifth Streets in Eureka and notice all the shuttered businesses, and many of these predate the Covid pandemic.

While some may say this is a natural evolution of business, and, in the long-run, we’ll all be better for it, I’m not so sure. Granted, I may be just an old-guy who longs for a never-existent long-dead golden age, but I feel that a loss of choice in health care is almost never a good thing. Large systems have no flexibility in dealing with the out-of-the-ordinary, and since few people are truly ordinary, we all end-up losing.

Good-bye Lima’s. You’ll be missed.

Notes:

1. <https://www.consumerreports.org/products/pharmacies-34693/walk-in-pharmacies-34694/na-ingles-387355/>
2. Op cit
3. <https://www.rxlocal.com/blog/reasons-to-love-your-local-pharmacy>
4. <https://communitypharmacy.com/2021/03/independent-pharmacy-vs-chain-pharmacy-what-are-the-differences/>