Smart lockers fast-tracked during coronavirus pandemic

Due to high levels of fear, South Africans are increasingly missing their healthcare appointments and not collecting their chronic medication during the lockdown. However, it is now more important than ever that people who are immune-compromised keep taking their chronic medication to increase their immunity for Covid-19.

Image supplied

To make sure that South Africans don't have to wait in long queues at clinics or hospitals to collect their monthly medication, Right ePharmacy and the National Department of Health is fast-tracking innovative Collect & Go smart lockers.

Seventy (70) locker sites are being rolled out in Gauteng, Mpumalanga and the Free State and will be completed within a month. Eighty percent of the sites are already live and the first patients will be able to collect medication in May.

Explains Fanie Hendriksz, managing director of Right ePharmacy, a division of NGO Right to Care, which provides innovative solutions for dispensing, distribution and collection of medicine including well-known ATM pharmacies, "Electronic locker technology has been widely used for e-commerce internationally. To improve healthcare delivery, Right ePharmacy adapted the solution to develop Collect & Go smart lockers for medication collection with the help of the CSIR. These locally manufactured secure electronic lockers safely store your monthly chronic medication, so you can quickly and easily collect it close to where you live and work at a time that suits you."

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Public healthcare patients who are stable on their chronic medication for conditions like diabetes, high blood pressure, HIV/Aids, asthma and many others and who need monthly medication have become used to going to their local clinic or hospital where they have to wait to get their medication.

Collect & Go is part of a Department of Health initiative to reduce congestion in public health facilities and to ensure that facilities remain able to cope with coronavirus and other emergency cases. It also supports the Department of Health's central chronic medication dispensing and distribution (CCMDD) programme and the national adherence strategy.

Collect & Go locations are near public health facilities and busy areas like community shopping centres, police stations and inside retail pharmacies and doctors' rooms which are close to communities, transport routes and areas where people live and work.

Patients will be registered for Collect & Go at their healthcare facility if their condition is stable. They will be given two months' supply of medication and provided with the date for a first Collect & Go experience. Patients will need to return to their healthcare facility for a follow-up visit every six months and will be reminded to do so via SMS. A healthcare worker will then assess the patient and renew the prescription for Collect & Go.

Simple medicine collection

As soon as the medicine is in the locker, patients will receive an SMS with a uniquely generated, one-time PIN on their mobile phone. On arrival at the locker, the PIN number is inserted on a touch screen. The patient opens the locker and removes the medicine parcel. The medicine parcel will contain two months' supply of chronic medicine.

Collect & Go smart lockers are customised to meet stringent pharmacy regulations. They include air-conditioning units and remote temperature monitors for optimal storage conditions. The lockers only need a 220V power source and do not need data connectivity. Because lockers can be installed in remote locations, Collect & Go will help increase access to medicines in SA's rural areas.

All medicine parcels are tracked. Medicine that is not collected is flagged and can be followed up telephonically by the Collect & Go call centre.

Hendriksz concludes, "Because collecting repeat medicine will become so easy, patients won't have to fear going to a healthcare facility during the Covid-19 pandemic. Collect & Go will make it easier for patients to stay on treatment, remain well and avoid health issues and additional risks. We are doing research to investigate and understand the benefits of this solution to both patients and healthcare workers."

Right ePharmacy has already successfully introduced innovation into medicine collection in South Africa, including ATM pharmacies as well pioneering in-pharmacy automation, which increases medicine dispensing capacity, operational efficiency and safety in busy public hospitals.

Collect & Go is supported by USAID. The Collect & Go helpline number is 080 111 2228 and the website is www.collectandgo.co.za.

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