

# Africa's first ATM pharmacy

Chronic patients given a lifeline by collecting medication in few minutes from machine

LERATO DIALE

PATIENTS in Alexandra who until recently have been forced to queue at a local clinic for up to eight hours to collect their chronic medication, have been handed a lifeline.

This comes after Africa's first ATM pharmacy was launched at Alexandra Plaza Mall yesterday.

Chronic medication patients can now collect their chronic medicines at the self-service ATM-style machines called pharmacy dispensing units (PDUs) while also doing their shopping.

The technology has been hailed for its ability to drastically reduce waiting times at a local clinics while also ensuring adherence to treatment.

The launch of the PDU is a partnership between the Gauteng department of health, Right to Care and their German counterparts. Among those attending the launch were Gauteng health MEC Gwen Ramokgopa, MMC for health and social development at the city of Joburg, Mpho Phalatse and Jessica Lapenn of the US embassy in South Africa.

Ramokgopa says the unit will go a long way in significantly reducing the long queues and congestion at local clinics. She also says this will help with adherence to treatment for the "missing" HIV patients who are supposed to be on ARV treatment.

"We have identified the long waiting times at government facilities where people wait between four and eight hours to get medication on a monthly basis.

"This translates to 2.5 work days lost or a cost of on average R150 to the individual who may or may not be working," Right to Care CEO Prof Ian Sanne said.

There are already PDUs in Soweto and Diepsloot and there are plans to roll out more of these machines to other parts of the country in the future.

The facility is open 12 hours a day from 6am-6pm seven days a week.

So far about 16 000 patients have been serviced through the facility.

Violet Maseko, 48, collects her chronic medication from the facility. She says the ATM pharmacy is a God sent.

"The system is right for us because there are no more long queues. It is five



**MEDICINE ON CALL:** Nosipho Lebea is one of the first patients to make use of the new dispensing unit to get her medication which was opened in Alexandra yesterday. PICTURE: TRAPPED MICROBUD.

## How the first in SA and African continent technology works

» THE pharmacy dispensing unit is aimed at halving queues at local healthcare facilities (You can basically collect your medicine while doing shopping at a local mall)

» Already in Gauteng there are about 400 000 chronic patients who are collecting their medicines off site and not at local health care facilities as part of the central chronic medicine dispensing and distribution programme

» About 16 000 patients have already been served at the ATM facility

**Easy steps on how to use the machine:**

» Officers recruit patients who are stable and on chronic medication at a clinic

» Their information is then logged on the system

» The next visit, patient go to nearest mall where the PDU is situated

» Patient scans bar-coded ID book,

ID card or pharmacy card

» They then speak to a remote pharmacist

» The prescription/medicine is selected

» The medicine is robotically dispensed and labelled and drops in the collection slot

» The machine then issues a receipt which shows the next collection date

minutes and you are out. It's not like before where we had to queue for five to six hours and some patients would get hungry and faint while queuing, so this is better for us," she said.

MMC for health and social development at the city of Joburg Mpho Phalatse said as a medical doctor who used to work as a casualty officer at a local clinic, she knew first hand the congestion at local facilities.

"One of the challenges we had was congestion at the clinics. We used to see all kinds of cases even after hours when we were meant to be seeing emergencies. There is really a need for health system strengthening by using technology.

"This is an innovation that will allow patients to come and receive their medication without having to go to the clinic," Phalatse said.

The system was first announced by

health minister Aaron Motsoaledi at the 21st International AIDS Conference in Durban saying the ATM pharmacy was necessary as the number of people on ARVs has increased from 400 000 to 3.4 million in three decades while the number of healthcare workers had not kept up with the increase "often leading to frustrated patients and lack of treatment adherence".

leratod@thenewage.co.za