

ROSALIND FRANKLIN UNIVERSITY OF MEDICINE & SCIENCE SCHOOL OF PHARMACY STUDENT WRITING CLUB:

Business Member Spotlight: The Drug Store, Mueller Drugs Inc.

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A unique pharmacy in Jefferson, Wisconsin is going strong, setting high standards for independent pharmacies. "The pharmacy with years of experience," as its slogan goes. The Drug Store has operated since 1899, and has overcome changes and challenges to remain one of the last few independent pharmacies in its community.¹ As pharmacy practice progresses, The Drug Store has found ways to build and adapt to the times and to the people within its community. Although the pharmacy has redesigned itself over the years, a few things remain the same—like its original tin ceiling and stained-glass windows, along with the staff's devotion to serving the community and its residents.¹ During the more recent history of The Drug Store, Joshua Lotz, PharmD, became its fifth owner. Dr. Lotz and his team work hard to keep the pharmacy's traditions alive. Dr. Lotz exemplifies the true meaning of "your local friendly pharmacists," continuing to build trust and establish deep, meaningful relationships with customers.

Day to Day Practice

The Drug Store operates six days a week, Monday to Saturday, from 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. The staff start their day by processing new prescription orders that have been sent in overnight or from earlier that morning. Throughout the day, Dr. Lotz and the pharmacy technicians are answering phone calls, filling out prescriptions, and ensuring customers are informed about their medications, insurance plans, and vaccinations (especially the COVID-19 vaccine and booster shots).

One unique service that The Drug Store offers is the dispensing of naloxone without a prescription. Naloxone, known by the brand name Narcan, is an opioid antagonist and is usually dispensed in emergency situations due to opioid overdose.² The extension of Wisconsin Act 115, expanding

Act 200 of 2014, allowed for practitioners to prescribe this medication to pharmacies under a standing order.³ This standing order enables "pharmacists to deliver opioid antagonists to individuals at risk for opioid overdose or to an individual in a position to assist an individual at risk for an overdose." This law has allowed the people of Wisconsin greater access to a lifesaving medication. As one of the earlier pharmacies to participate in the state's standing order, The Drug Store has helped local pain management doctors and other local facilities. The process to receive naloxone is as simple as filling out a form that is later processed through the patient's insurance or out of pocket. Although the process is simple, Dr. Lotz and his team have taken steps to ensure that patients are well educated on the medication. Each time naloxone is dispensed, the patient is given forms to fill out and reading materials that contain pertinent education information about the drug. This is one of the unique ways that The Drug Store is helping its community combat the opioid crisis.

Bumps in the Road

Over the years, The Drug Store has faced many obstacles. With the recent ownership transition, Dr. Lotz had to take on the role of business owner, essentially learning business 101. Many pharmacists graduate without prior access to learning how an independent pharmacy operates. Dr. Lotz says how appreciative he has been of his staff, his customers, and the overall response from his community. They welcomed him with open arms, sharing not only their expertise in the pharmacy, but also stories of how the pharmacy used to be back in the day. However, within the past two years, The Drug Store has faced a much heavier burden from the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, Dr. Lotz, like many others, was uncertain of just how devastating the virus was. As the number of deaths continued to

skyrocket in 2020, Dr. Lotz and his team began to implement COVID-19 safety guidelines as soon as they were announced by authorities. With the assistance of a Pharmacy Society of Wisconsin grant, Dr. Lotz was able to fund supplies that met the COVID-19 social distancing guidelines. Gradually, the pharmacy transitioned to relatively more optimal care for their patients and staff. At the time, due to high demand for plexiglass separators, The Drug Store had decided to operate its business outdoors until the glass separators were installed. This brought a new era of changes for the pharmacy, which offered drive-through pickup and curbside vaccinations. With the pandemic running at an all-time high, the number of prescription deliveries to their customers also nearly doubled in a short amount of time. In addition, the number of vaccinations had significantly increased as well. Although curbside services are a new addition to the pharmacy, Dr. Lotz plans to continue implementing these services for his customers, especially for his elderly patients, since they have voiced their appreciation and enjoyment of the service.

Raising the Bar

There are many reasons why this local, independent pharmacy is gaining popularity within its community. The Drug Store is one of the few pharmacies that doesn't use an automated/pre-recorded phone answering system. Patients appreciate the simplicity of calling into their local pharmacy and speaking to a live person right away, versus the mainstream automated systems used by many pharmacy chains. The Drug Store also prides itself on building trust and establishing deep and meaningful relationships with its customers. The staff have set a goal to recall and to know their patients on a first-name basis. Many customers like the personalized and fast services that The Drug Store offers. The pharmacy has seen many customers switch

over to them, because other pharmacies are often under-staffed, and people like being able to come in and leave quickly. Another service Dr. Lotz and his team offer is providing assistance with insurance plan selection. The extra help from Dr. Lotz and his team allows their customers to utilize the pharmacy's services without being compromised in coverage. This is important for many, because certain insurance plans will not cover certain pharmacies, and so, Dr. Lotz works together with his customers to choose a plan that fits. In addition, they also offer unit dose packaging, delivery, and a combination of services that other pharmacies do not offer together.

And although Dr. Lotz and his team are now providing great services to the community, he notes that independent pharmacy was not his first career choice. Lotz says, "Independent pharmacy is not where I had the intention of ending up. I wanted to go into the pharmacy administration route, and when that did not work out, I heard of this job opening from a friend of a friend. At the end, I liked the personalized level that is unique to independent pharmacy." He encourages new pharmacists to participate in a rotation or similar exposure at an independent pharmacy.

Moving Forward

The Drug Store is always finding ways to improve while keeping the people they care for close to heart. They are looking to invest in services to transform their pharmacy into a one-stop shop. About a year ago, Dr. Lotz became certified to offer testing services such as an A1C test, an influenza test, and many more. He is looking to start offering e-care plans as part of the medication therapy management plan, and recently switched to a new pharmacy software that is much more user friendly. In addition, the pharmacy is also a part of the Community Pharmacy Enhanced Services Network, which fosters relationships between healthcare providers and pharmacies to better coordinate a patient's care plan. Dr. Lotz hopes that, with all the new transitions, he can focus more on improving the quality of services within The Drug Store to create a memorable experience for his staff and customers. Lotz says to pharmacy students, "In my position as an owner, there are a whole lot of other things that you have

to learn along the way like financials, marketing, and HR, and all of these other little things you are not taught in pharmacy school. Hence, again, one of the best things you can do for yourself would be to do a rotation at [an independent pharmacy]. This is a good way to gauge to see if this is the route for you. If you are not able to get an opportunity to rotate, intern, or work at an independent pharmacy, I would suggest going into one and asking to talk to the owners and pharmacists. Generally, owners and pharmacists that I have talked to would be happy to take some time out of their day to explain what they do."

Lotz cites a recent example of inter-pharmacist helpfulness. "During the rush of COVID-19 vaccines when we got our new pharmacy software, a pharmacist from a different pharmacy spent a couple of hours showing me things that I did not know the software did. It is a good community of independent pharmacists that want to see each other succeed."

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Disclosure: The author(s) declare no real or potential conflicts or financial interest in any product or service mentioned in the manuscript, including grants, equipment, medications, employment, gifts, and honoraria.

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