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ARE MINI-CLINICS A GOOD THING? STATES INCREASE THEIR SCRUTINY

Georgia may become the last state in the nation to grant prescription-writing privileges to advanced practice registered nurses (APRNs) – and the first state in the nation to curb the rapid spread of “mini-clinics” that use APRNs to diagnose and treat patients with simple ailments.

Over the past five years, mini-clinics have multiplied across the country, offering patients access to APRNs and other health-care professionals without first requiring an appointment. The Minneapolis, **Minnesota**-based [MinuteClinic](#) is among the oldest of these operations. The clinics that are located in eight states (including Georgia) have fielded more than 400,000 patient visits. The clinics treat only patients with minor ailments such as sore throats and ear infections; patients with serious complaints are referred to their physicians. The clinics offer convenience, reasonable prices and high-quality care to insured and uninsured patients, said Dr. James Woodburn, MinuteClinic’s chief medical officer. A typical visit to a MinuteClinic takes only 15 minutes.

The State Capitol building in Minneapolis houses a MinuteClinic, as does the University of Minnesota campus. But most clinics are located in retail outlets such as Target stores and CVS pharmacies, and their growth is drawing legislative and regulatory scrutiny, as well as complaints from the medical establishment.

Legislators want to protect patients and the broader health-care system, said Georgia Senator Don Thomas, a medical doctor who chairs the Health and Human Services Committee. “Obviously the reason the drug stores want them there is so that they’ll write a lot of prescriptions for expensive medication and they’ll be filled right there in that drug store,” he said. “We’re concerned about the monopoly these stores have.”

Thomas sponsored a bill ([SB 603](#)) that would grant prescription-writing privileges to APRNs – but it also would prohibit nurses from writing prescriptions at mini-clinics that are located inside retail establishments that also house a pharmacy. The bill was passed by the Georgia Senate.

The Georgia House passed a similar bill ([HB 395](#)) that also would grant prescription-writing privileges to APRNs. It does not contain the prohibition on APRN practices within retail establishments.

As *SHN* went to press, the two measures were in a conference committee. If the conference committee adopts the Senate version and the measure is signed into law, it could significantly curtail the spread of mini-clinics such as MinuteClinic. If either measure is passed, Georgia will join the other 49 states in having granted prescription-writing privileges to APRNs.

Some states regulate mini-clinics by requiring physician ownership. In **Indiana**, MinuteClinic acts as a kind of franchisor, selling outlets to local doctors.

Woodburn is adamant that MinuteClinics are not replacing primary-care physician practices. But the clinics appear to have gained a following among the insured as well as the uninsured. About 80 percent of MinuteClinic’s customers have commercial insurance, Woodburn noted. He added that the time savings and reasonable prices have drawn “tremendous support from large, national employers,” many of whom recommend and reimburse MinuteClinic’s services. “We absolutely increase access to care,” he said. “Our prices are posted, they’re good prices, and we provide good-quality care.”

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