

Bridging the Distance for Pharmacy Care



Polly Steeves, RPh

ECONODRUG • Wahpeton, North Dakota



In the upper Midwest region where Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota converge, there are a lot of wide open spaces dotted with small towns and rural communities.

Wahpeton, North Dakota (population 8,500), in the southeastern part of the state, is typical of the area in size and scope. It is the Richland County seat and borders the neighboring Minnesota town of Breckenridge. Together these two communities have a daytime population of about 13,000.

Wahpeton is home to Econodrug, an independent pharmacy owned for the last 13 years by Polly Steeves, RPh, and her brother Brian Steeves. Econodrug is also on the forefront of telepharmacy, an emerging trend for many independents in rural areas to help provide pharmacy care to patients who otherwise would not have easy access to services. Telepharmacy uses state-of-the-art telecommunications technology, allowing pharmacists to provide pharmacist care to patients at a distance.

In August 2005, Econodrug opened its first telepharmacy in the small community of Ottertail, Minnesota. Steeves received assistance from her alma mater, North Dakota State University (NDSU), which has established a telepharmacy project. The school provided a grant to help get the telepharmacy, one of three in the state, up and running.

“The telepharmacy allows us to have technicians run it, and a pharmacist will check the hard copy, tablets, and the label on the bottle over a camera system and counsel over a television,” she says. “It works very well and is very clear. We run our telepharmacy with a pharmacist two times per week, and our technicians work the other days. Our technicians do a great job with this new responsibility.”

Steeves gives plenty of credit to her brother for making the telepharmacy a reality. “Brian has been very instrumental because of his knowledge with computers and technology.”

Steeves was born in Minneapolis but has long since established deep roots in Wahpeton, having moved there in the second grade.



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—POLLY STEEVES



After graduating from NDSU in Fargo in 1990 with a bachelor's degree in pharmacy, Steeves began her career working for hospital pharmacies, which she enjoyed. In 1991, she came back to Wahpeton to work in a retail pharmacy. In May 1993, Steeves was given an opportunity that moved her career into a completely new direction when she became a partner in Econodrug, a new independent pharmacy in a grocery store in Wahpeton.

Steeves admits she was both excited and apprehensive about her new venture.

“I was very nervous about owning a business; I never had any business classes in school, but my family has been involved in small business, and they were very encouraging and willing to help me out,” she says. With 13 successful years behind her, her fears turned out to be unfounded. Brian manages the business side and serves as the computer/tech guru, while Steeves serves as pharmacy manager for both the main location and the telepharmacy.

Econodrug has two full-time and two part-time pharmacists, along with four full-time technicians, two business

managers, and two clerks. “Brian and I make a great team,” Steeves says. “He takes care of the business while I can concentrate on the pharmacy part.”

Steeves is proud of the efforts the pharmacy made to help people sign up during the Medicare Part D rollout. Other services offered by Econodrug include weekly diabetes and cholesterol screenings. In the telepharmacy, she says, “patients have been very appreciative about our services, especially in finding ways to save money and to help with OTC products without having to drive 20 or 30 minutes to a pharmacy.”

When asked what types of qualities create an effective community pharmacist, Steeves offers a few thoughts.

“I think you have to be very customer-oriented, and always be there to talk to patients about their medications—including cheaper options, splitting pills, interactions, and compliance issues,” she says. “I like to spend time at the till and counsel patients on their prescriptions; it gives me a great opportunity to talk to customers—I learn so much about them and any concerns they may have.”