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In-store urgent care clinics struggle, close across Treasure Valley

Promoters had hoped the express medical offices would ease pressure on emergency rooms and appeal to multitasking families. They didn't.

Stopping by that store for a gallon of milk and a quick medical exam? Maybe no longer. Retail-based medical clinics in the Treasure Valley tried to fill a niche for busy families. But they had mixed results, and three such clinics - one in Boise and two in Caldwell - have closed since last month for lack of patients. A fourth closed last year, leaving just two in the Valley.

The Valley retail clinics opened in Albertsons, Wal-Mart and Rite Aid stores in the past few years. They generally had nurse practitioners trained to treat a large menu of common ailments like sore throats or minor injuries such as sprains. The usual charge: \$55.

Two Express Care clinics in Rite Aid pharmacies closed March 4. The clinics, operated by Saint Alphonsus Regional Medical Center, were in the Rite Aids at Apple and Boise streets in Boise and on Cleveland Boulevard in Caldwell. A clinic in an Albertsons store near Columbia Village in Boise closed in 2009.

The closed clinics were among five Saint Al's opened in 2007 and 2008. A Primary Health clinic in a Wal-Mart Superstore in Caldwell closed in February. When such clinics began mushrooming nationwide about five years ago, they were touted as a way to help reduce unnecessary - and costly - emergency room visits by people without health insurance. When it announced its clinics in mid-2007, Saint Al's also said it hoped the clinics would relieve pressure on ERs.

But the hospital's leadership has since changed, and a Saint Al's official this week said he was unaware of a link between emergency room visits and the Express Care clinics.

Primary Health Medical Group has tracked some of its patients since the WalMart clinic closed - and the patients aren't flocking to emergency rooms, spokeswoman Kathy Winn said. "We have seen a lot of them go to our other clinics in Canyon County," Winn said. Primary Health's signature clinics are walk-in, urgent-care centers open seven days a week. They are not attached to retailers.

More than 1,200 clinics are in operation in retail stores across the U.S. A spokeswoman for the Convenient Care Association said new clinics still are opening. "I'm not sure of the case in Idaho, but that is the trend nationwide," Tine Hansen-Turton said.

At least one study, published in the Archives of Internal Medicine, found that many such clinics end up in higher-income neighborhoods, not in poorer neighborhoods where people are more likely to go without care.

The Express Care clinics that are still open - at McMillan and Eagle roads and at State and 15th streets - see a mix of patients. Some are uninsured, but others are people who may have more money than time. They may pay \$55 because it is faster and more convenient to be treated there than to make an appointment with a doctor for minor problems. The clinics take Medicare and Medicaid, and their services are covered by many private insurers.

Saint Al's declined to release financial or patient numbers but said its closed clinics weren't getting enough traffic.

"They weren't breaking even, and it didn't look like they were going to break even soon," said Tom Reinhardt, assistant vice president for physician network development.

The money matters, but so does need, Reinhardt said. The hospital moved the nurse-practitioners in the newly closed clinics to Fruitland, where Saint Al's has taken over management of a medical clinic with the intention of expanding the specialty care and other services it provides.

The Caldwell clinic might reopen sometime, depending on need, Reinhardt said.

The Primary Health medical clinic in Caldwell opened in November 2008 at a Wal-Mart store and closed in February, Winn said.

People inside Wal-Mart knew the clinic was there, but it was harder to attract patients driving by, she said. In addition, patients who saw the Primary Health logo expected the same services Primary Health offers at its urgent-care clinics, not the scaled-back services the clinic provided.