

Not another trip to the doctor

In recent years, there has been a progression from centralised laboratory testing to Point of Care testing, with clear signals that in the future, over-the-counter diagnostic testing would become more widespread. With a growing demand and an ageing population, Europe is leading the transition with many pharmacists now providing health clinics, largely driven by the regulatory environment. Sales of self-diagnostic kits have increased by 29% in the past five years and are estimated to grow to £158m by 2012. A recent survey indicated that one in six adults is happy to buy a self-diagnostic test - including home pregnancy tests, urine tests and blood pressure kits - from a pharmacy where advice is available. However, around half said that they would still prefer to have tests done at the doctor's surgery or at a hospital.

Point of Care testing within the pharmacy is attempting to fill a need in the market place, providing healthcare professionals with simple tests that have actionable outcomes and results that are generated in minutes. The general population is sceptical however, and for this emerging market to be successful, the testing provided by the pharmacists must be seen as reliable. It must also compare favourably with existing laboratory tests in terms of accuracy and precision, and have a sufficiently low possibility of user error in terms of both use and interpretation of results.

Aside from the range of mature tests being offered by the pharmacist, a new range of tests - traditionally developed only for the professional market - is becoming more widely available at the Point of Care. One of these is an allergy test produced by Phadia AB - a simple 20 minute test based on a small blood sample from a finger prick that proves or disproves an allergic reaction to specific allergens. Given that allergic disease is a growing and significant health problem with a third of the UK population suffering from some type of allergy and a doubling in cases of asthma, rhinitis and eczema in recent years, Phadia's test would appear to have come at just the right time.



While the range of emerging tests is diverse, the most successful demonstrate some common elements. They tend to have been designed to be simple to use and inexpensive to make. They are also able to deliver meaningful results within the consultation time, allowing for actions or prescriptions to be offered there and then.

It is evident that there is an understanding of the market, the consumer requirement and the technology, and so given the growing appetite for health awareness that we see in Europe - where even leading supermarket chains are teaming up with diagnostic companies to deliver in-store healthcare - we will undoubtedly soon start to have much greater access to a wide variety of testing. As these tests mature and gain greater regulatory clearance, it is only a matter of time before this model propagates to other markets.

Simon.Burnell@CambridgeConsultants.com