

# THINKING OUTSIDE THE BENCH

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**How one small-town pharmacist  
is growing his business  
with heart-led care.**

by Melissa Nix



All photos by Alexa Barrett

*Clark Bishop, 36, says he became an independent pharmacist so that he can be available to each person who comes in the door.*

*Blackwell, Okla., just a one-hour drive from Wichita, Kan., sits nestled among low ridges and windswept flatlands. The nearly six-square mile town was established during the 1893 Cherokee Outlet Land Run.*



It's 4 p.m. on a blustery February day in Blackwell, a small town in northern Oklahoma. The glass door to Hutton Pharmacy swings open, jangling a bell that announces the latest customer.

"Hey Clark, I need some advice," says an elderly man with a raspy voice, clad in jeans and an Oklahoma State jacket. "I've got a cold."

Clark Bishop, owner, manager and chief pharmacist at Hutton Pharmacy, swings out from behind the counter to greet the man, Max Claybaker, 87, a lifelong resident of Blackwell, population 6,600.

"I think Mucinex might help," he advises Claybaker, a retired crop insurance salesman.

"He's my pharmacist," Claybaker says, smiling. "I'll be 88 on Wednesday and Clark is helping me get there. I wouldn't go anywhere else."

That "anywhere else" is just one other local pharmacy, in a town that used to support eight. Health care has changed a lot since Hutton Pharmacy became a fixture on Main Street well over a century ago, but Bishop is mindful of the legacy

he inherited. He keeps his eyes on his patients.

"We've looked at other sites in town," Bishop says, "but if we're to center ourselves on being a community pharmacy, we need to stay on Main Street. We're here to stay."

Bishop, who was awarded the National Alliance of State Pharmacy Association's Excellence in Innovation Award in 2019, bought the independent pharmacy in 2016, in partnership with three others, after its long-time owner, Dennis Hutton, decided to retire.

Since their acquisition, the pharmacy has increased its prescription volume by 20 percent and doubled sales in the front of the store, which offers gifts, food, makeup and other health care items.

In addition to Hutton, the partners own three other independent pharmacies. Their four-pharmacy network has the ability to shoulder overhead and garner better prices through economies of scale. That helps them mitigate some of the struggles other independent pharmacies are grappling with nationwide, as the health care industry undergoes rapid change.



*Hutton Pharmacy sits on a prominent place on Main Street, in a building from 1899, not long after Blackwell's founding.*

## LOCAL INVESTMENT

Bishop, who worked at a chain pharmacy for 10 years, says he and his partners are investing in their communities and the health care of their patients in myriad ways.

They've invested in technology, too. Of course, at the foundation of everything is e-prescribing, which Bishop lauds as transformational. When he began his career 12 years ago, e-prescribing was in use, but there were still a lot of paper prescriptions floating around, ripe for forgeries or missing important information. Oklahoma also began to require the electronic prescribing of controlled substances in January 2020. The benefits of e-prescribing are numerous, says Bishop.

"E-scripts are always legible. They streamline the workflow and input process. They provide access to diagnosis codes and vital signs and have more complete patient and prescriber information. In addition, patients can't lose or damage them and they're nearly impossible to forge."

While Bishop values the existing technology that supports the business, he has an appetite for more information and more tools.

"For instance, I've got a patient on two different statins from two different doctors that didn't communicate well," Bishop says. "And I'm the one catching the error. I'm having to call two places for clarification and it's just not efficient."

Tools such as Clinical Direct Messaging and RxChange could go a long way in addressing such rework, and Bishop acknowledges the efficiencies they could bring to his workflow.

Despite the challenges, Bishop seems to be the right person for the job, given the accolades he's receiving. He's working to build bridges in the community as well.

"It takes a good pharmacist to be able to care for the community," says Bishop's partner Steven Trevino, 31, a certified pharmacy technician and the director of operations for the four-pharmacy network. "We couldn't pick a better person, because Clark truly cares for Blackwell."

### **A COMMUNITY IN NEED**

Richard “Cap” McInay’s motorcycle rumbles to a halt in front of the pharmacy. He’s come to pick up a prescription.

McInay, 56, more commonly known as “Pastor Cap,” is the minister of the town’s First United Methodist Church. He and Bishop have partnered on a National Council For Behavioral Health effort called Mental Health First Aid, which they’ve used to help patients and parishioners alike who may be dealing with a mental health issue. They’re working to train the town’s local police and firefighters, too.

“We have a large part of our population that has dealt with generation-to-generation poverty. There is a tremendous amount of post-traumatic stress disorder that comes with that – and a lot of these folks don’t even know they have it,” Pastor Cap says. “Many are close to homeless, moving from place to place, looking to find a shelter that’s safe and secure. They’re in survival mode.”

### **THINKING OUTSIDE THE BENCH**

Back inside the pharmacy, it’s bustling. A patient holding a brown toy poodle on his lap is chatting with several others waiting in a small seating area. Behind the counter, 27-year-old Justun Kukuk, Hutton’s other pharmacist, as well as four pharmacy technicians, are busy filling and checking prescriptions, advising patients and ringing the cash register.

Bishop became an independent pharmacist because he wants to be available to each person who comes in the door, he says. His business model enables him to keep a large staff plus another pharmacist on

*The Hutton Pharmacy team: Lori Navarette and Karen Bryant, front-end sales; Cindy Gregson, pharmacy clerk; Lacy Bufford, pharmacy technician; Justun Kukuk, pharmacist; Clark Bishop, pharmacist; Jessica Harrington, pharmacy clerk; Dawson Henrichs, pharmacy technician.*



payroll, allowing them to deliver high-touch patient care that is a critical differentiator for independent pharmacies. At Hutton, they know all their patients by their first names.

“So that even when we’re busy my patient knows they’ll be able to get my attention for an extended period of time,” he added in an aside. “I have to be staffed well enough in order to handle that.”

Standing at the far end of the counter,

“We’re only open in the evenings,” Wooderson says. “I often have to tell Clark to not stay too long.” Bishop lives in Oklahoma City, an hour and a half commute one way.

Lifelong resident Tracee Bonewell, 57, who came in for her monthly shot that prevents her debilitating migraines, was once a skeptic of the change in ownership at Hutton’s. No longer.

“Now I call to see if Clark is in,” says the teacher at Blackwell Middle

population is mainly on Medicaid. He’s also a member of Blackwell’s Chamber of Commerce.

### **BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS**

All these relationships help his business to thrive. Relationships are key for independent pharmacies, says Bishop, and he’s got a few more tips.

“As a community pharmacy, you’ve got to think outside the bench,” he says.

“What are you doing besides dispensing? Think about what you can do for



*Above left: Pastor Cap McInay, minister of Blackwell’s First United Methodist Church, stops by Hutton to talk with Bishop. The two have partnered to destigmatize mental health care as well as to care for some of the community’s most vulnerable. Above right: Photographs of Hutton Pharmacy and its previous owner, Harold Hutton, hang in the Top of Oklahoma Historical Society Museum, a Beaux Arts building listed on the National Register of Historic Places.*

Bishop raises his voice to reach a patient amidst the din.

“Beverly are you still waiting for that prescription?” he asks Beverly Wooderson, 64, who runs Living Water Community Clinic, a non-profit that provides health care to the town’s uninsured.

Bishop volunteers at the monthly clinic as often as he can.

School, adding that he’s the only clinician in town she lets administer her monthly shots. “I’ll ask if he’s at the pharmacy, and if not, I’ll wait until he’s back.”

Bishop and his team have worked hard to show their commitment to Blackwell. In addition to volunteering at Wooderson’s clinic and deploying Mental Health First Aid with Pastor Cap, Bishop works once a week at Green’s Country Clinic, whose patient

providers that benefits both that practice and your pharmacy.”

“God bless this guy,” says Phil Green, 50, a physician assistant and owner of Green’s Country Clinic. “Everyone’s concerned about costs these days. Many times I’ll send over a prescription to Hutton and it doesn’t fit the patient’s formulary or tier. Clark will advise me to switch over to another drug with equally good results. Or Clark will tell me, ‘Hey, this drug is going to interact poorly with

this other medication.' I mean, the feedback I get from Clark is just amazing. Plus, he knows all my patients."

"It's a win-win for both of us," Bishop says. "Together, we're impacting patient lives in positive ways that separately we couldn't do."

### SITTING UNDER THE SHADE OF A FAMILY TREE

After a long and busy day, things are starting to wind down. The staff are closing shop and clicking open lockers

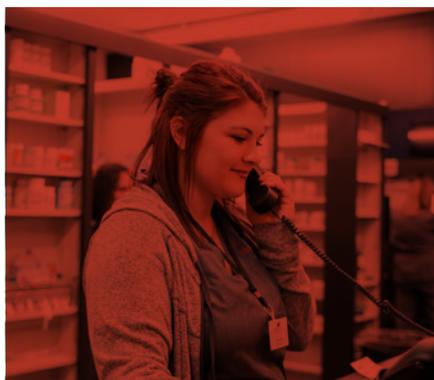
to gather their things. Bishop is feeling reflective as he prepares for his long drive home.

"The Hutton family planted this tree," Bishop says. "Now I'm the one living underneath it, but I'm still trying to make it grow. The tree is going to look very different when I'm done with it, but it's still going to be providing that shade." ■

Melissa Nix is the editorial director at Surescripts.



*Above: Patient Tracee Bonewell receives her monthly shot from Bishop. The Blackwell native was once a skeptic of the change in pharmacy ownership but now seeks out Bishop for her therapy. Right: Pharmacy clerk Jessica Harrington is fielding calls from patients and providers on a very busy Monday.*



**Editor's note:** This article originally appeared in Intelligence in Action, a blog produced by Surescripts. This article is being reprinted with permission from Surescripts.

### Postscript

The world has changed a lot since Surescripts reported this story in February. COVID-19 has put our health care system under severe stress, limiting the number of available providers, while also calling overdue attention to the critical role of pharmacies and pharmacists. We checked in with Clark Bishop to see how the crisis has impacted Hutton Pharmacy and patient care.

While they haven't allowed any foot traffic inside the store since early March, they are delivering medications and set up curbside pick-up.

"It's not ideal, but we've made it work," Bishop says. "We have done our best to deliver the same quality of service in a few different ways to keep us and our patients safe. Our communication with clinicians across town has also seen a dramatic increase."

Bishop said that the perception of pharmacists as essential care providers has been widely accepted for some time, but now the decision makers and legislators have started to take more notice, which is a bright spot amidst the crisis. He expects, "if the science is there," to be administering the COVID-19 vaccine when it becomes available.

Another bright spot? "The smiles and gratitude of our patients that we see every day."