

COMMUNITY roots



Rob Richardson and Clint Melton strive to bring the best of independent pharmacy to their hometown

by Chris Linville

Rob Richardson and Clint Melton are the typical story of hometown boys done good. Both grew up in Livingston, Tenn., both attended Tennessee Tech as undergrads, and both received their pharmacy degrees from the University of Tennessee a year part.

After both did stints in the chain world, they decided they wanted to strike out on their own, and they opened R&M Family Pharmacy in Livingston in January 2012. Richardson and Melton also own Super Discount Drugs in Livingston, and Family Wellness Pharmacy, down the road in Cookeville, Tenn.

Along with growing up in the community, Richardson and Melton had various jobs in the local hospital's pharmacy in high school and in college, and Richardson's father worked 40 years at the hospital. Those experiences helped pave the way.

"We made a lot of relationships prior to us opening the pharmacy here, just working in the health care setting," Melton says. "That helps, and getting to know your doctors and treating them well also helps."

Their guiding principle is to treat their patients like family. After all, some of them they have known their entire lives. "That's what we try to do," Melton says. "Sometimes you have to tell them the truth and it's not always easy, not something that they want to hear. But if you tell them the truth, and explain to them what's going on, most people appreciate that."

MAKING THE LEAP

Richardson graduated from Tennessee in 2008 and Melton in 2009, and both went to work for Walgreens after leaving school. They noticed that a lot of independents were selling to chains.

"Once we started talking to these guys, we thought about how much more we would like it being out on our own," Richardson says. "I think we saw some regret from some of those guys for selling, so we figured we would try to give it a chance. They were all older and looking for an exit strategy, and I understand that, but we figured we're young, and if we are going to do it, now is the time."

Richardson and Melton had attended **NCPA Ownership Workshops**, which they highly endorse as a resource in providing a foundation for planning and other essential details that are needed to run a business.

Still, they don't deny they had butterflies about diving into a venture that offered no guarantees.

"Yeah, I was scared to death," Melton admits. "We had some information from those guys who had been pharmacy owners before, and we could always call and ask them questions. And going to the Ownership Workshop helped quite a bit, but you never really know if you are going to be able to carry the volume to make it, and there are just business aspects that you don't know about."

Richardson echoes those thoughts, saying, "As far as being scared to death? Yes. We had some decent-paying jobs, so you have to be a little bit crazy to take that leap, but I'm sure glad we did."

Melton says his chain experience gave him some hope, at least in a humorous way.

"I said that I didn't learn anything about what to do at Walgreens, but I learned what not to do. We basically did everything opposite of what Walgreens did, and that's worked out really well for us," he says with a laugh.

Christy Hamilton, pharmacy business manager for wholesaler Morris & Dickson Co., affectionately calls Richardson and Melton "my boys." Hamilton, based in Nashville, has been handling their account for 4½ years, and says, "They are so hard-working and innovative. I am just so impressed by how they operate. They are the No. 1 independent in their area, and they do such a great job serving their patients and educating them."

Hamilton says she has been in the business for a long

time, and can tell when a pharmacist just seems to be going through the motions. Richardson and Melton fall in the opposite category. "They just go all out," she says. "I was pushing them to do adherence, and they were all in on that. They basically said, 'Let's do it.'"

FOUNDATION

Livingston has a population of about 4,000 and is the county seat for Overton County, which has about 22,000 residents and is located in north-central Tennessee. Family Wellness Pharmacy is located in Cookeville, which has almost 35,000 residents. R&M is the largest of the three stores. It has three full-time pharmacists and about a dozen technicians. Family Wellness has one full-time pharmacist and one part-time, along with four technicians. Super Discount Drugs, which is mostly standard retail (and has an old-fashioned soda fountain), has one full-time pharmacist and three technicians.

Services include medication adherence and synchronization programs, durable medical equipment, medication therapy management, Medicare open enrollment, immunizations, multi-dose pill packaging, and delivery.

Compounding is also a big part of the business. R&M does some non-hazardous compounding, but most is done at Family Wellness, which is USP <800> compliant and is in the process of finishing a new clean room that was added to allow compounding of hazardous material.

Richardson and Melton say that Family Wellness also does quite a bit of Dispill bubble packing and a significant amount of long-term care business. Richardson says the pharmacy was losing patients to PillPack, so about 18 months ago he and Melton decided to invest in Parata prescription packaging technology at R&M. So far the results are encouraging.

"We probably have around 100 patients on it, through the strip packaging," Richardson says. "There is a mental health facility in town that wanted Medicine-On-Time bubble packaging, which we offer, so this helps with that." About 100 patients are signed up on the adherence program.

Richardson says about half of the pharmacy's prescription counting is done through ScriptPro automation (also located at R&M) which has about 200 cells. It processes almost 50 percent of everything the pharmacy dispenses, he says.

Fast Facts: R&M Family Pharmacy – Livingston, Tenn.

Established:	2012
Management:	Rob Richardson, PharmD; and Clint Melton, PharmD (also owners of Super Discount Drugs and Family Wellness Pharmacy)
Products & Services:	Include standard retail, home delivery, curbside pickup, medication adherence and synchronization programs, durable medical equipment, long-term care services, medication therapy management, Medicare open enrollment, immunizations, IVR, refill app, multi-dose pill packaging, and various wellness classes.
NCPA member since:	2014

The pharmacy also has invested in Eyecon at all three of its locations. It's a machine vision counting system. A camera mounted above the counting platter captures photo images used to count pills five times per second. If a count is questioned, the photo can be viewed and/or printed. Every pill is sequentially numbered and all of the prescription data is annotated onto the photo.

"Obviously it's a lot quicker than counting by hand," Richardson says. "That and the ScriptPro and Parata all integrate with our pharmacy software system, so there are no real hang-ups – from a workflow standpoint it really helps us crank out as many prescriptions as fast as we can."

SPREADING THE WORD

Richardson's and Melton's deep community roots certainly make them familiar faces in the community, but they understand the need to continuously market and promote their business. With a substantial number of older patients, they do their share of radio and newspaper advertising. They also say Facebook has been effective. They use Digital Pharmacist for their social media content.

"They do a lot of the Facebook ads for us, and help get us at the top of Google searches," Melton says. "We

don't use Twitter or Instagram yet, but I expect we will eventually with demographic changes."

Both Richardson and Melton say that old-fashioned pavement pounding has been beneficial as they do their share of doctor detailing.

"I think doctors are the best source for getting the word out," Melton says. "We show up and bring examples of the different things we do, such as the strip packaging or the Medicine-On-Time bubble packs, and get them familiar with it. A lot of times they say, 'I didn't know you guys did that, I was going to send my patients' scripts to that place in Pennsylvania and have it mailed.' We tell them we can do that right here."

COVID-19 ADJUSTMENTS

Like everyone else, Richardson and Melton had to adjust how their pharmacies operated when the COVID-19 pandemic struck. As many other pharmacies did, they gave away or sold masks to doctors and other businesses.

Additionally, like other pharmacies, they began offering curbside pickup, with SMS messaging where patients can text their names and a description of their vehicle, and somebody on staff can come out and provide their medication. The lobbies have been re-opened, but curbside is still

offered, and Richardson and Melton say that might become a permanent feature.

"Before COVID-19 we never thought about texting opportunities," Melton says. "It's worked out pretty well. It's definitely getting the staff's step counters going strong."

Patients can renew prescriptions through a mobile app or via an IVR system. Digital Pharmacist manages the pharmacy IVR and Facebook traffic, and sends a weekly or monthly report that basically tells Richardson and Melton how many calls went to the IVR, and how many prescription refills came by the website or the app.

"It gives us a breakdown of how many hours on the phone we've saved by the technology taking care of a lot of that stuff for us," Richardson says.

PROVIDING CONVENIENCE

Richardson and Melton are always trying to think of ways to help make things more convenient for their patients. R&M is open on Saturday and closed on Sunday, so they decided to close Super Discount on Saturday and open it for a few hours on Sunday.

"That way people have access to us seven days a week. We had our



From top left, pharmacy technician Jan Cooper (1), pharmacist and co-owner Robert Richardson (2), pharmacist and co-owner Clint Melton (3), pharmacy technicians Kelli Melton and Shelby Nichols (4), and celebrating the holiday spirit at the pharmacy Christmas dinner.



MaryFaye Carter, with one of the pharmacy's Eyecon machines, is part of a talented group of pharmacists serving the community.

pharmacy software team basically link the three stores to create a centralized system, so prescriptions can easily be transferred from one to another," Richardson says. "If someone has their prescription at Family Wellness in Cookeville but they aren't going to make it in time to get it filled, if they are here in Livingston they can just pop in to one of the other stores and we can pull it up and fill it from there. That's helped out a lot."

ADDRESSING CHALLENGES

Independent pharmacists have been facing challenges for years, from low and slow reimbursement, the increased influence of PBMs, forced mail-order, and any other number of items. In the last few years pharmacy DIR fees have exploded at an exponential rate.

"It's definitely a big issue right now, but we haven't let it deter us," Melton says. "You work toward remedying all of these things, but at the same time you can't let it deter you as far as far as your business is concerned. You do your best to try and limit the fees but you don't let it sink you. You can't let it bring you down, you just keep going and try to build your business."

One way the business is trying to blunt the threat of DIR is by focusing on its adherence program, which was started about one-and-a-half years ago. Getting patients synced on their medications typically translates to better adherence. Doing so will ideally help the Part D plan's Medicare Star Rating and keep the pharmacy's EQuIPP scores high enough to limit or minimize the DIR fees being taken out.

To help reduce any workflow disruptions with adherence, Richardson and Melton arranged for a 5 a.m. shift on Mondays and Thursdays. One pharmacist and one technician

come in at that time and focus only on med sync.

"That way we get the monthly meds taken care of on those days, and hopefully we get the med sync items done by the time we open the doors at 8 a.m.," Richardson says. "That gives us a three-hour head start on that, and that way the med sync items don't really affect our daily workflow as far as call-ins and walk-ins. The staff really likes that shift as well – getting up that early is kind of tough but you get to leave early that day. By 1 p.m. you're done."

BEST AND THE BRIGHTEST

With any successful business, having a talented and motivated staff is essential. Richardson and Melton know that to expand their business, they need top-notch staff. Technicians are often the backbone of a pharmacy. As Melton says, "Our technicians are really good. We pick the cream of the crop."

One reason is because of a local school, the Tennessee College of Applied Technology, which has a pharmacy technology program where Richardson and Melton serve as preceptors.



Pharmacy technician Anthony Wilson works with R&M's card compliance packaging.

"A lot of the students there end up doing rotation here at one of our three stores," Richardson says. "We not only get to teach them, but see their work ethic, their personality, how they interact with the public – that's key. They might be there two weeks or two months depending on how much time they need as far as the college is concerned. About 75 percent of our techs came through that program."

STEPPING UP

There's been a lot of discussion recently about allowing pharmacists to work at the top of their license, and that's certainly a goal for Richardson and Melton. They started doing vaccinations the day they opened, and they provide perhaps the highest volume of flu and pneumonia immunizations in Overton County.

"We have doctors' offices call us to give all their vaccines now," Melton says. "We had to do a bunch of hepatitis A vaccines for the local hospital recently. That puts you at another level. That steps you up. Not only does it get customers into your pharmacy, but it puts you on a higher level."

With COVID-19, the pharmacy applied for a CLIA certificate of waiver to not only test for the 2019 SARS-CoV-2 novel coronavirus, but other ailments as well.

Another way that Richardson and Melton are looking to help their community stay healthy is through wellness classes, including smoking cessation, weight loss, and cholesterol management, to name a few. These are primarily run by Richardson's wife Mallory, who is a nurse. R&M Pharmacy has also been selected as one of 18 pharmacies to participate in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Diabetes Prevention Program (see sidebar), with Mallory serving as the point person on that.

"Again, that's just another step that pharmacists can take to move forward and enhance our status," Melton says.

CULTURE OF CARE

With everything they do, Richardson and Melton want to let their community know that they are always available and ready to help, which they say is at the heart of independent community pharmacy.

"We like people to come in and see our personalities, and for us see their personalities. Being a small town we like to have that family feel," Richardson says. "We try to treat people like we would like to be treated. A lot of times when people come into the pharmacy they are sick or hurting, and you are possibly seeing them on some of the worst days of their lives, so we want to be there to help them, treating people like they should be treated." ■

Chris Linville is *America's Pharmacist*® managing editor.

R&M Family Pharmacy tabbed for CDC diabetes prevention program

R&M Family Pharmacy in Livingston, Tenn., is one of 18 independent pharmacies recruited by NCPA to participate in the National Diabetes Prevention Program, a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention-funded initiative. NCPA is collaborating with the Association of Diabetes Care & Education Specialists and OmniSYS on the project.

The program recognizes that while neighborhood pharmacies are in an ideal position to deliver and expand the National DPP, they may be deterred from doing so due to costs associated with participation, which include lifestyle coach training, data collection, and participant recruitment and retention. This new joint initiative will address those financial burdens. Along with the initial group of 18 pharmacies participating in this project, NCPA will recruit an additional 30 pharmacies at a later date.

"Diabetes can cause great damage and comes with many risks, which we're seeing in the ongoing coronavirus pandemic as it appears to be increasing severity among those contracting the virus," said NCPA President Brian Caswell, owner of Wolkar Drug in Baxter Springs, Kan. "The National DPP will enable neighborhood pharmacies – the most accessible health care providers – to better identify those at risk of developing diabetes, engage them in a lifestyle change program, and improve health outcomes. NCPA is excited to be participating in this collaboration with our partners and helping patients lead healthier lives."

For more information on the National DPP, visit www.cdc.gov/diabetes/prevention/index.html.