



## **Attention Walmart Patients... Healthcare in Aisle 4?**

**By Mikaela Conley**

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Walmart has been working under the radar (not anymore) to be the “largest provider of primary healthcare services in the nation,” according to a request for healthcare partners leaked online today by NPR.

The 14-page request details the superstore’s mission to “expand access to high quality health services” and “dramatically lower the cost of healthcare.”

The plan would see primary care clinics popping up throughout the Walmart’s 3,500-store empire just in time for health care reform, which will mean millions more insured customers.

But before you start looking up your Walmart doctor, the retail giant is denying the claims.

“The RFI statement of intent is overwritten and incorrect. We are not building a national, integrated, low-cost primary care health care platform,” Dr. John Agwunobi, senior vice president and president of Walmart U.S. Health & Wellness told ABCNews.com in a statement.

Walmart spokespeople would not expand on whether the chain is attempting to increase its healthcare services in other ways. Walmart is already home to 140 primary care clinics — far fewer than CVS’ 550 and Walgreens’ 355.

“There are a lot of flowers trying to bloom in addressing nation’s shortage of primary care,” said Robert Field, professor of law, health management and policy at Drexel University. “Some are more spontaneous and they tend to be focused in the private sector. A lot of private companies have noticed the gap and have tried to come up with ways to attack it.”

Health care is the only large sector of the American economy that is growing at a consistent high rate, year after year, noted Dr. Mark Fendrick, professor of internal medicine and health management policy at University of Michigan. Coupled with a large influx of newly insured patients expected after the Affordable Care Act comes into play in 2014, retail stores like Walmart may be the only place patients can go since primary care is so overstretched in the U.S. already.

“We are certainly open to any new models that will allow Americans to get the primary care services that we know improve health and, in some situations, reduce cost, when compared to having no primary care provider and using the emergency room or a different provider every time,” said Fendrick.

“For those in areas of the country where there are not enough primary care providers, proximity to a retail store like Walmart should offer opportunities to expand access,” said Fendrick.

Another important piece is the business tactic: the clinics will bring customers to the store.

“Even if the clinic isn’t a major profit center, it’ll bring in people who are their prime demographic target: families,” said Field. “Once they’re there, they’ll find a countless array of other things to buy, so if you think of it as a way to attract customers, my guess is it’ll be very successful.”

But some family doctors are skeptical about in-store clinics that seem to be popping up more and more.

The American Academy of Family Physicians opposes retail health clinics, particularly for the treatment of chronic medical conditions.

“The AAFP is committed to the development of a health care system based on strong, team based patient centered primary care defined as first contact, comprehensive, coordinated and continuing care for all persons and believes that the RHC model of care further fragments health care,” the AAFP said in a statement.