Walgreens’ Crawford named first-ever DSN Pharmacy Innovator

BY JIM FREDERICK

The Kermit Crawford era at Walgreens is drawing to a close.

As of Dec. 31, Crawford, one of the industry’s best known and most respected pharmacy executives, will retire as president of pharmacy, health and wellness at the nation’s top drug store chain. He’ll depart some 31 years after joining Walgreens as a pharmacy intern in Houston, while earning a BS in pharmacy from Texas Southern University, and after leaving an indelible stamp on the company’s core retail mission as a broad-based, patient-focused center for community health-and-wellness services.

As Walgreens’ chief pharmacist, Crawford oversaw a vast pharmacy, health and wellness network spanning more than 8,200 drug stores in all 50 states, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. In that role, he envisioned and championed a higher level of practice for the company’s pharmacists and pharmacy technicians, and helped spark a dramatic transformation in the way Walgreens goes to market and serves customers.

“As architect of Walgreens’ key growth strategy to advance the role of community pharmacy in health care, Crawford helped launch the company into a new century of service and value creation, modernize retail pharmacy-led health-and-wellness services in America, and meet the nation’s expanding need for convenient, quality, affordable health care,” the company reported July 24 when announcing Crawford’s plan to retire.

“In light of his many contributions to advancing the practice of pharmacy, enabling pharmacists to practice at the top of their education, as well as the role community pharmacy plays in the nation’s healthcare system, and a vision that the real product is the outcome and not the pill, the editors and publishers of DSN selected Crawford as its first-ever DSN Pharmacy Innovator Award winner at an exclusive reception last month. (For more, see page 3.)

Beginning in early 2015, Crawford will retain a connection with Walgreens as “senior counselor” to president and CEO Greg Wasson. He’ll also become executive in residence and senior adviser to the dean at the University of Southern California’s School of Pharmacy, while boosting his already active role with the American Diabetes Association by serving as national chair for its new Ad Council campaign.

“After 31 years with Walgreens … the time is right to retire from the company to broaden my horizons and seek new ways to serve,” Crawford said. “I love Walgreens, cherish my years and friends here, and the incredibly dedicated people across the company. To me, community pharmacy has long been an unsung hero in our healthcare system, helping primary caregivers to provide convenient, affordable and essential health-and-wellness services in neighborhoods across America. I look forward to continuing to help Greg Wasson and the team to advance the role of community pharmacy in health care.”

Post-retirement, Crawford said he’ll continue to campaign for provider status for pharmacists and a higher level of practice, on behalf of both patients and health plan payers. “Both Crawford looks back

Kermit Crawford, Walgreens

Crawford, a key architect in the transformation of pharmacy practice and the elevation of health-and-wellness services at the nation’s largest drug chain, is retiring at the end of this year. DSN spoke at length with the pharmacy veteran about his role in the evolution of pharmacy at Walgreens, his outlook for the profession, and his own plans for 2015 and beyond.

DSN: As of January you’ll be adviser to Walgreens CEO Greg Wasson, executive in residence and senior adviser at the University of Southern California School of Pharmacy, and national chair for the American Diabetes Association’s Ad Council campaign. This sounds more like a new set of responsibilities than a retirement?

Kermit Crawford: I plan to stay very active in what I’ve dedicated my career and my life to — working to advance the role of the pharmacist and the profession of pharmacy, especially with the work I’m doing with USC. And, of course, to look for ways to provide better care for the customers we serve. That was one of the reasons I got into pharmacy.

DSN: Why become a pharmacist?

Crawford: It was that local independent pharmacist who knows everyone and is a respected person in the community. That really inspired me to be a pharmacist and play a role in health care. And my mom was a nurse, so I grew up in a

Continued on page 28

CONTINUED ON PAGE 28
patients and payers are looking for a personalized experience,” he said. “Patients want us to have information about them — it needs to be a relevant conversation about them. Payers want it to be about their brand. Everyone wants a better, more personalized experience. Everyone wants better health outcomes. That’s the ultimate goal.”

Walgreens’ chief executive had high praise for the longtime pharmacy and health chief. “Words cannot capture the magnitude of Kermit Crawford’s impact on Walgreens and our people, on America’s retail pharmacy industry and on the health and well-being of millions of customers and patients we have been privileged to serve over the years,” Wasson said.

Crawford’s impact on U.S. retailing and health care hasn’t gone unnoticed outside the industry. In 2012, Savoy Magazine named him one of the “Top 100 Most Influential Blacks in Corporate America.” Black Enterprise Magazine called him one of the “Top 100 Most Powerful Executives in Corporate America.”

The real challenge: patient outcomes

More than most high-profile pharmacy leaders, Crawford was able to articulate what pharmacy practice should be about. In an era of unprecedented challenges for a healthcare system saddled with unsustainably rising costs, a shrinking network of primary care physicians, an aging population in need of quicker and more convenient access to care, and an explosion in chronic conditions like diabetes and hyperlipidemia, community pharmacy has to reinvent itself, Crawford said.

Repeatedly over the past decade, he has laid out a clear vision for a higher level of community pharmacy practice that goes way beyond dispensing and basic prescription counseling. And, with the full support of president and CEO Greg Wasson, himself a pharmacist, Crawford has taken that vision to drive a transformation in the way Walgreens’ 27,000 pharmacists and its retail clinicians serve patients as a convenient and accessible source for community-based health-and-wellness services.

Beginning with his promotion to SVP pharmacy services in 2007 (he was promoted again to executive VP in 2010, and head of all pharmacy, health-and-wellness services the following year), Crawford set about reinventing the way Walgreens goes to market as a retail pharmacy and health services provider. “In this role, he pioneered the effort to transform community pharmacy from a transaction-based practice to one focused on access to affordable, quality care,” Walgreens reported.

Pharmacy, Crawford explained, had no choice but to evolve. It must fill the void that’s opened in a health system desperate for new, more cost-effective and more accessible modes of care and disease prevention.

“Pharmacists are the most trusted professionals in the industry. But they’re also the most underutilized professionals in the healthcare system,” said Crawford. “Pharmacists are not practicing at the top of their education.”

At Walgreens, he said, “the product is no longer the pill; the product is the outcome. We have to begin to address the real challenge, reinvent itself, Crawford said.

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Forging a collaborative care model

By Jim Frederick

Team up with other healthcare entities, or wither on the vine.

That’s the new reality for community pharmacy, said Kermit Crawford on the eve of his retirement as president of pharmacy, health and wellness for Walgreens. In that powerful post as one of pharmacy’s most visible and vocal champions, Crawford was an early proponent of an integrated, team-based approach to patient care, making Walgreens pharmacy an early adopter of the accountable care organization model and other aspects of health reform.

“We were the first pharmacy-led ACO,” Crawford declared in a recent interview with DSN. “I believe the model of the future is going to be a collaborative model with strategic partners. No one group will have all of the core competencies, and you’ll need to have strategic partnerships, and you’ll need to understand how to work collaboratively both internally and externally. And it will clearly need to be patient-focused.”

Indeed, said the pharmacy leader, “the next revolution will be around ‘patient-first,’ where customers have more choice, more information and more options for care. And with more information, I think we’ll see more transparency around quality and also around price.”

For Walgreens, that means becoming “the strategic partner of choice — seeking targeted partnerships and pursuing joint initiatives with healthcare providers and payers” through ACO-based physician groups, hospital networks and other partners, said president and CEO Greg Wasson.

“Walgreens is becoming a key part of the community healthcare delivery team, supporting primary care physicians, health plans and health systems to address patient needs and gaps in care,” Wasson added.

Patients themselves are at the center of that collaborative team, said Crawford. “Today, with mobile devices, patients have information in the palm of their hand. And that information will give patients more power, and they will demand that we know who they are.”

“They’ll demand that we have their data at our fingertips, and that we can begin to connect both their information and experience literally from provider to provider, and make it truly seamless and easy for patients to navigate the healthcare environment,” he added.

“We’re going to see more of this patient focus, and the result is going to be pay for performance. People are going to expect to meet their goals, and we’re going to get paid for the performance and quality we bring. And I think Walgreens is better positioned to do that than most any other retailer, not only in this country but on an international platform.”

Crawford

Continued from page 28 which is the outcome. And pharmacists can do significantly more to address the healthcare needs of this country, especially as it relates to quality, access and affordability. Because when you look at the key stakeholders — physicians, payers including PBMs, health plans or government, patients themselves and the providers — the pharmacist has more contact with each of those stakeholders than anyone else. So the pharmacist can connect the dots in American health care.”

That elevation in pharmacist expectations and professional status was a driving force in the gradual realignment of Walgreens’ mission over the past six or seven years. “I think the real transformation at Walgreens has been putting the patient first,” Crawford told Drug Store News. “And when you do that, you move from this transaction-based dispensing model to one that plays a far greater role in health care, and comes around building a relationship with the patient.”

“Our approach has been about providing better access and better quality at affordable costs, and leveraging the assets of this company to benefit all stakeholders in this environment we’re in,” he said.

“Take our flu shot and vaccination program: We’re truly convenient, we’ve got the access and it’s absolutely at a more affordable cost than going to the physician’s office,” said Walgreens’ top pharmacist. “So it’s about doing well while doing good, and it’s clearly in our DNA.”

Pushing the practice envelope

Crawford’s drive to boost its pharmacists’ practice model and engage more effectively with patients, payers, physicians and other members of an integrated health care team has rippled through the organization and its retail mission. “While Walgreens has provided trusted pharmacy services for more than 110 years, the company is also pushing the envelope of what pharmacy can be,” the company reported.

“From consulting on medications to providing health testing and biometric screenings, Walgreens pharmacists are becoming even more focused on relationships rather than transactions.”

“Walgreens’ pharmacy solutions revolve around improving health outcomes,” the report added. “Formal conversations on medication therapy management held in private consultation rooms help underscore the importance of patients taking their medications as prescribed, leading to improved outcomes for patients and lower costs for payers. Services such as new-to-therapy consultations help patients prepare for changes to their prescription regimen. And with electronic health records, Walgreens can remind patients when they’re due for a new vaccination and send electronic notifications to their doctors.”

What’s more, said the company, “transforming community pharmacy also involves elevating the role of pharmacy technicians” with additional training and national certification.

Crawford said Walgreens’ drive to advance community pharmacy and retail wellness services would continue under Wasson’s leadership — and on a bigger, multinational stage following the merger of Boots’ vast retail and distribution network in the United Kingdom. “You’ll continue to see the Walgreens-Boots alliance play a greater role in the lives of both our patients and customers on a global basis,” he said.

“We’re going to create a global, pharmacy-led well-being enterprise,” Crawford predicted confidently.
Walgreens’ Well Experience format: Design concepts for pharmacy’s future

BY JIM FREDERICK

Walk into many newer Walgreens stores, and you’ll see the company’s revitalized mission as an accessible community health-and-wellness provider come to life. Designed to improve patient access to pharmacists and showcase the chain’s health, wellness and daily living offerings more effectively, Walgreens’ Well Experience store format embodies the vision for a more engaged and more comprehensive model of pharmacy practice championed over the past decade by Kermit Crawford, outgoing president of pharmacy, health and wellness.

Work on the new Well Experience store format actually began as early as 2006 and 2007, Crawford explained. The new design incorporated both the vast expertise Walgreens had forged serving patients at its pharmacies with both prescription services and disease prevention and management, and the perspective Crawford had forged as the former chief of Walgreens Health Initiatives, the company’s pharmacy benefit management division.

“My first 20 years were on the retail side, so I had a clear understanding of that [business-to-consumer] relationship,” said Crawford. “But running WHI, our PBM, I really started to understand our other key customers in the healthcare equation — our payers and providers. So it was about putting it all together. … Within this, we started to think about the design of the future, and how we could create value for both patients and payers.”

Informing the design process: the input of health plan decision-makers and others. “We had all these different constituents, and we needed to have a value proposition for each of those,” Crawford explained. “We brought in all the key stakeholders to look at that new concept, and get their opinions. It was a very collaborative design.”

The result is a retail concept store that “emphasizes the patient-pharmacist relationship and positions Walgreens as the No. 1 destination for health and daily living,” according to the company.

Walgreens says its Well Experience stores “feature a new, enhanced layout, a number of new product selections and a completely revamped pharmacy and healthcare experience,” with a front end “focused on daily living needs that help customers live well, while the Well Experience pharmacy is designed to foster pharmacist-patient relationships to help customers get well and stay well.”

Among the innovations Crawford championed in the development of the Well Experience design are private consultation areas and pharmacist work areas in front of the pharmacy counter that “help patients feel comfortable bringing their health and medication concerns to their Walgreens pharmacist,” Walgreens said.

“As our Well Experience strategy moves pharmacists out from behind the counter to better counsel patients on the proper use of medication, and to expand our scope of services, we are enabling our healthcare professionals to provide even more advanced care through store design, automation and healthcare information technology,” said the company. “Harnessing technology tools, such as electronic medical records, shared billing and scheduling platforms and integrated data, Walgreens can provide a holistic view of each patient for health plans, physicians and other health system partners. We are meeting what has been described as healthcare’s triple aim: improving patient experience, driving better health outcomes and lowering overall healthcare costs.”
Walgreens' expanding immunization effort
The point of the spear for wellness offerings

BY JIM FREDERICK

Nothing highlights Walgreens’ transition to full-service community health provider better than the company’s massive flu shot and immunization program. Under an aggressive, seven-year expansion program driven by pharmacy, health and wellness chief Kermit Crawford, the program has given Walgreens a powerful platform on which to build an expanding menu of preventive health-and-wellness services.

“Flu shots were the beginning of patients looking at our pharmacists differently — giving our pharmacists permission to play a greater role on the healthcare team,” Crawford told DSN in an interview. One reason: Walgreens pharmacists were talking with patients “not only about flu shots, but about the disease states that required them to get a flu shot,” he said. “It really started that face-to-face interaction.”

Walgreens pharmacists and retail clinicians delivered 8.5 million immunizations in 2013, making its stores the top non-government source for inoculations for influenza and other conditions. “Walgreens is the long-standing private sector leader in providing vaccinations,” the company reported. “As we provide convenient access to this preventive healthcare measure, our immunization program demonstrates the growing patient confidence in pharmacists as an important member of their healthcare team.”

It’s remarkable that the notion of pharmacists providing immunizations barely registered among Americans and their health plans less than a decade ago. A Walgreens pharmacist in Colorado helped trigger a nationwide change in that perception by suggesting that pharmacists provide flu shots; the idea was quickly embraced by company leadership and actively promoted by Crawford as a natural extension of its pharmacists’ healthcare expertise.

The program grew rapidly. “We had about 300 pharmacists certified to do immunizations” in 2007, said Crawford. Today, he added, “all 27,000 of our pharmacists are certified immunizers. We’ve changed laws and regulations in states that now allow pharmacists to provide immunizations. That’s continuing to expand into other immunizations and vaccines.”

“It’s much bigger than Walgreens,” Crawford continued. “It’s really reflective of the industry because all pharmacies throughout the country are now providing flu shots. Today, it is very common for people to get immunizations in a pharmacy from the pharmacy professionally underserved communities, so in many cases we are clearly the front door of health care in many of these communities,” he added.

The chainwide availability of electronic health records, HIPAA-protected and accessible to Walgreens pharmacists, also gives its professionals “the ability to create a profile for their patients for all of their vaccines,” said Crawford.

“We’re the only pharmacy that has this electronic health record in all of our drug stores,” he added. “And now we have an immunization app within the Walgreens.com app, so you’ll be able to have your entire vaccination and immunization history in the palm of your hand, just like you can have your drug profile in the palm of your hand. And we’ll be able to notify the patient when they’re due to get a vaccine, and who’s eligible to get those vaccines.”

Thus, the company’s extensive vaccination services play a big role in its expanding health-and-wellness model. “One of the things we’ve wanted to do is allow our pharmacists to play a greater role in the prevention of disease,” said Crawford. “We believe in prevention over treatment, helping prevent chronic disease. So this is innovation helping to lead into prevention and the management of chronic disease.”

With the recent addition of the Alliance Boots pharmacy network in the United Kingdom and Europe, Walgreens’ reach as a major immunization provider is going global. Pharmacists at Boots already are giving flu shots, “but with the larger vaccination program we’ve put in place, we will be able to expand that into Boots and particularly into other countries,” Crawford explained.

What’s more, Walgreens has allied with the United Nations Foundation to help provide up to 3 million life-saving vaccines to children in developing countries through a donation to the Foundation’s Shot@Life campaign. “With our ‘Give a shot, get a shot’ program, now we’re providing vaccines to children in underdeveloped countries that don’t have access to these vaccines,” said Crawford.