

West End independent pharmacy thrives

Owner thinks service means bright future

TRADE NAMES

By Roscoe Puckett
Special correspondent

Independent neighborhood pharmacies, once a cornerstone of America's health-care delivery system, have all but vanished in the aftermath of competition from shopping center-based chain drugstores.

A few have managed to survive, however, and one of them is Lafayette Pharmacy Inc. It has been doing business on Lafayette Street, between Monument and Patterson avenues, in Richmond's West End, for 54 years. J. Melvin Fitzgerald, the current owner, is optimistic not only about its future, but the future of independent pharmacies.

"I feel independent neighborhood pharmacies have a real bright future because personal service is coming back, and independents can provide more personal service than chains. Personal service is going to be the name of the game," he declared.

Buttressing this prediction is his belief that 70 to 80 percent of all drugs will be paid for by third-party insurance companies by the end of the century.

"In this situation, the price is going to be the same at an independent store and chain store. So service is going to become the primary consideration. If customers can call a pharmacy like mine and have a prescription charged to their accounts and delivered to their homes, that will be a lot more convenient than driving to a shopping center, parking, waiting in line for their prescription and driving home again," he explained.

Fitzgerald, who described Lafayette Pharmacy as a basic drugstore that, in addition to filling prescriptions, sells over-the-counter remedies, greeting cards, candy, etc., has made personal service the pharmacy's hallmark since acquiring ownership in March 1986.

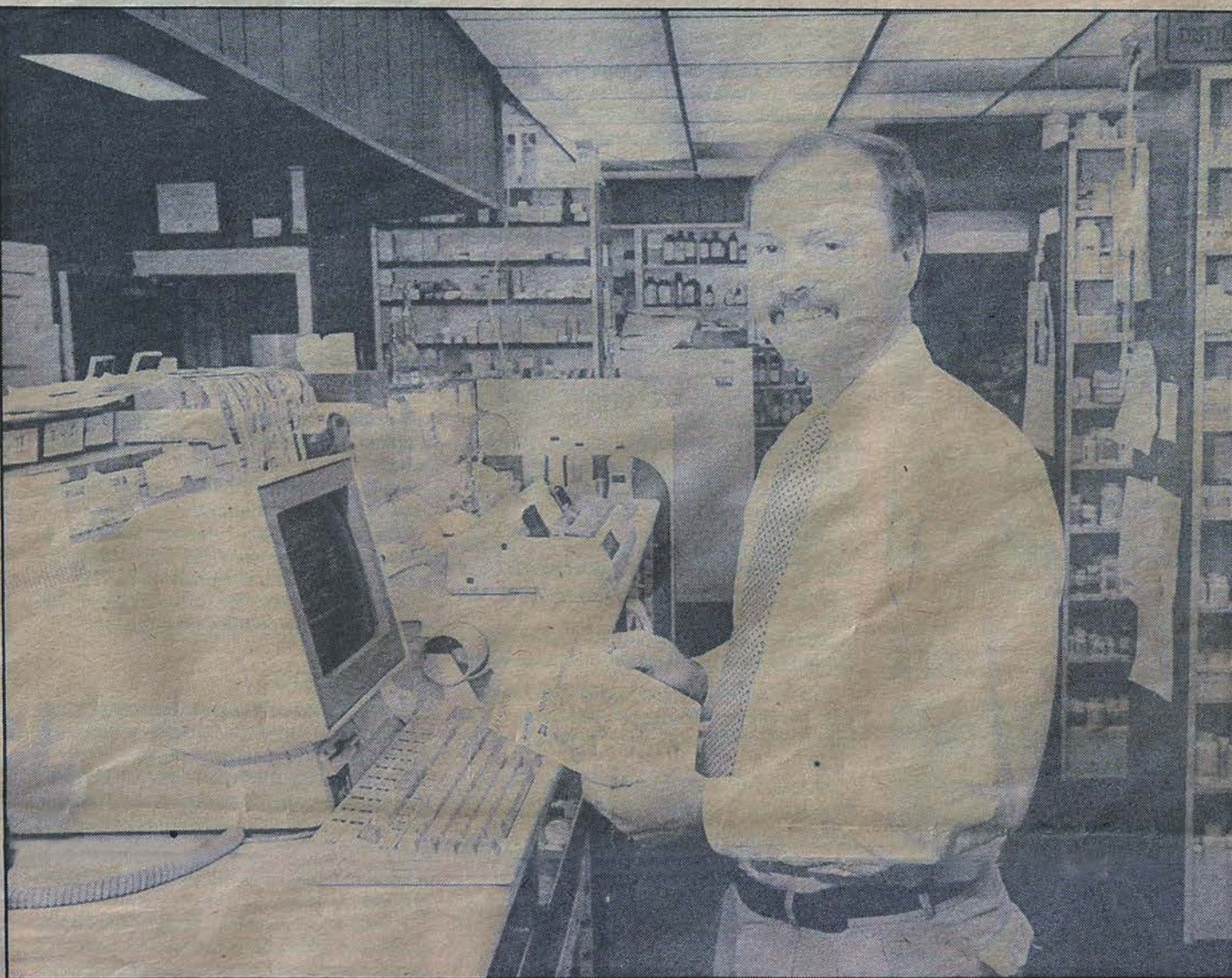
For instance, he offers in-store charge accounts because he believes many people prefer to write one check at the end of the month rather than writing a multitude of checks throughout the month. The pharmacy has more than 600 active charge accounts.

Delivery is another service of the pharmacy. Fitzgerald said this is growing tremendously because people are either too busy or unable to come into the pharmacy.

"Our delivery enables customers to obtain the drugs they need quickly without having to come in. We make several delivery runs each day, and if need be, we can deliver a prescription within about 45 minutes providing there is no need to consult with the customer's physician. This makes a big difference to a lot of people," he said.

Recognizing that individuals who must regularly take a number of different drugs either don't take them at the proper time or fail to obtain necessary refills, Fitzgerald has conceived and implemented what he calls the RT. Dose system.

"If you can keep a particular condition under control by properly taking the medicines that have been prescribed for you, you stand a lot better chance of staying out of the hospital and staying self-sufficient. And this is where my system fits in. It makes it easy



Bob Brown/The Richmond News Leader

J. Melvin Fitzgerald worked as a pharmacist at Lafayette Pharmacy for two years before buying the store.

for people to take their medicine properly," he said.

The RT. Dose system is similar to unit dose systems used in hospitals and nursing homes. But unlike those systems, it is designed for in-home use, providing all of the medicine the customer requires for a week at a time.

Contained under individual blister packs on a 6½-by-9-inch piece of cardboard are all the tablets and capsules to be taken at each specified time of each day of the week. Each packet is appropriately labeled, and the customer simply punches the medicine out of the blister packs at the proper times. Special checking is done to ensure that each blister pack contains the proper tablets and capsules, and that they are compatible for consumption at the same time. The pharmacy also keeps track of when refills will be needed and delivers them two to three days ahead of time.

Among the approximately 80 people currently using the system is Garland Beasley, who suffers from Parkinson's disease.

"I also suffer from some short-term memory loss," Beasley said. "When you have memory problems, your worst fear is 'Have I taken my medicine or have I not taken it?' When you punch it out, you know you've taken it, and this is very reassuring. I've been on the RT. Dose system since last October, and it has really helped me a lot."

Fitzgerald, whose pharmacy stocks nearly 3,000 drugs and fills nearly 600 prescriptions a week, takes exception to the widespread perception that prescriptions can be filled more economically at chain pharmacies.

"People think that independents are always higher. If you call around, you're going to find that some (prices) are higher at independents and that some are lower. But if you take 10 or 20 basic drugs, I believe that in the long run, you will find that independents are well within the range of chain drugstores pricewise," he said.

Fitzgerald, a native of Danville, began his career in 1977 as a staff pharmacist for Dart Drug in Washington. He came to a Revco Drug Store in Richmond in 1980 and subsequently worked for the previous owner of Lafayette Pharmacy for two years before buying the store.

Fitzgerald said he was motivated to go into business for himself because "Pharmacists work long hours and my thought was if I'm going to work all these hours, I might as well be the owner and not be working for someone else."

Lafayette Pharmacy is open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturday, and closed on Sunday. Most of its customers reside within a five-mile radius of the store, and Fitzgerald knows most of them either by sight or, in the case of those who do business over the phone, by voice.

After handling all of the pharmaceutical responsibilities himself during what he described as "a long first year," Fitzgerald is now aided by three other pharmacists who work on a part-time basis. The pharmacy also has three full-time and eight part-time employees who work as clerks and delivery people.

"I'm very fortunate. I've got super employees who do a great job," he said.

Fitzgerald said the pharmacy's business has doubled since he acquired it. He is hopeful that this growth will continue and is particularly eager to expand use of the RT. Dose system.

"The nation is going to have to develop a health-care delivery system that is cost efficient. You realize huge savings when you keep people at home and out of hospitals, and I feel my system can help do this," he said. "My dream is to see RT. Dose grow and become a separate entity." ♦

The Résumé

Name: J. Melvin Fitzgerald.
Current position: Owner, Lafayette Pharmacy Inc.
Born: June 20, 1951 in Danville.
Education: B.A., Appalachian State University; B.S. in pharmacy, University of Georgia.
Career path: Staff pharmacist, Dart Drug, Washington, 1977-1980; staff pharmacist, Revco Drug, Richmond, 1980-1984; staff pharmacist, Lafayette Pharmacy, 1984-1986; owner, Lafayette Pharmacy, 1986 to present.
Family: Married to the former Bridget Ellen Byre of Bedford. One daughter, Bridget Larmon, age 2.
Professional affiliations: Richmond and Virginia Pharmaceutical Associations.
Spare-time pursuits: Racquetball, basketball, windsurfing.