

# Phone DOCTORx answers the call

By Mark Skala  
STAFF WRITER

It's Saturday afternoon, a day of gardening complete when you realize that annoying rash you just cleared from the yard is poison ivy. The itch is unbearable and the rash is spreading.

There's no way to reach your primary care physician and you'd rather scratch all night than sit for three grueling hours elbow-to-elbow with far sicker people in an overcrowded hospital emergency room.

Thanks to modern technology and the foresight of a group of emergency room physicians, there is another solution. And it could be just a quick car ride and phone call away. You could have a prescription in hand long before you are even checked in at the ER.

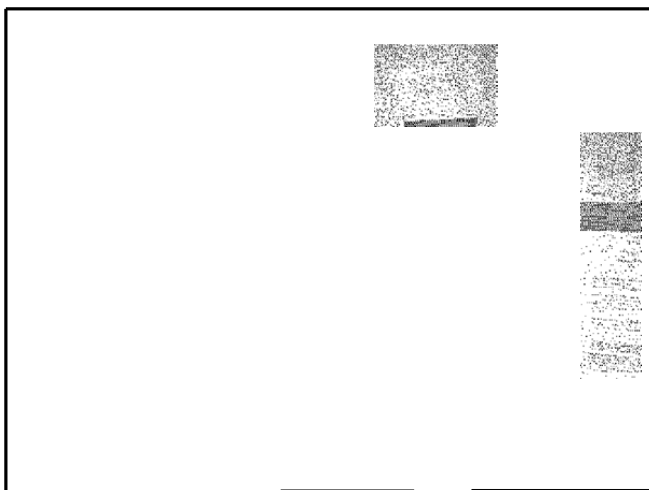
It's called the Phone DOCTORx and could be coming to a Stop & Shop near you.

In the next few weeks the Phone DOCTORx will be unveiling five more telephone conferencing booths at various Stop & Shop locations in eastern Massachusetts. The physician consultation/prescription service has met with success at its inaugural location in East Harwich on Cape Cod, and is about to branch out at Stop & Shop stores in Franklin, Hingham, Pembroke, Mashpee and Norwood.

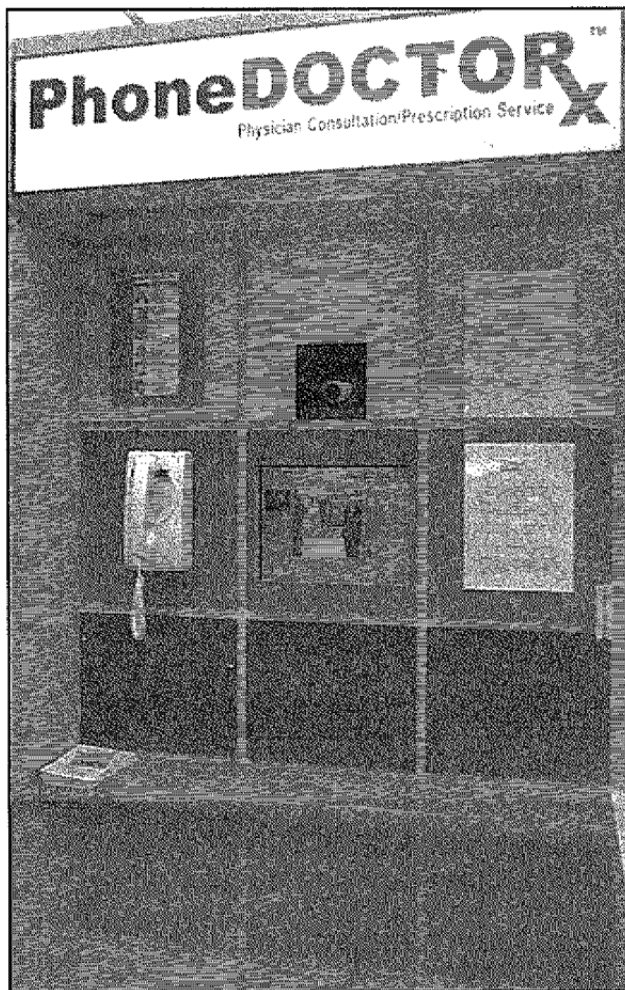
"We're talking about relatively simple, straight-forward, episodic cases," explains Dr. Paul Bulat, the chief executive officer and force behind the Phone DOCTORx who also heads the ER at St. Luke's Hospital in New Bedford.

"It's as easy as picking up the phone at our kiosk and then, if needed, we fax a script right here," he says, pointing to the pharmacy in the busy Stop & Shop. "It's all very secure, it's not on the Internet and no one can tap in. There's complete privacy."

Since its opening in May 2001, the Phone DOCTORx has provided care and consultation for more than 70 cases, most dealing with sunburns, "pink eye" tick bites, sinus infections and the occasional prescription refill for a weary vacationer who left their medicine back home. Of the 70 or so cases, three were referred back to their primary care physician or it was recommended they seek treatment at the local ER.



Dr. Daniel Shea gives advice to a patient talking to him via video conferencing.



STAFF PHOTOS/MARK SKALA

The Phone DOCTORx kiosk at the Stop & Shop features state-of-the-art technology.

"One was a 9-month-old and we won't treat anyone under 5," says Dr. Daniel Shea, chief medical director for Phone DOCTORx and also an ER physician at St. Luke's. "The other two were middle-aged men; one had back pain but previously had cancer. It most likely was back pain, but that was too risky. The other had indigestion, but also had had a heart attack... so he really needed to see someone directly just to rule anything out."

Here's how the Phone DOCTORx works. Enter the kiosk — positioned tight next to the pharmacy — and pick up the phone. Within seconds you see the doctor on the video screen and he, likewise, sees you from his computer terminal at the Phone DOCTORx headquarters located in a non-descript building in Taunton. The technology is state of the art and provides a crisp picture on the monitor of the doctor you are talking to at the other end.

He or she may ask you a number of questions about what brought you in, if the symptoms are ones you've had before, just as if you were in the ER or doctor's office. Once it's been determined what's wrong and what the remedy is, the doctor provides various instructions which come over the computer monitor. If a prescription is required, one is quickly faxed to the pharmacist just a few feet away or can be sent to one of your choice. The \$35 fee gets charged to your credit card.

"We're not in the business of primary care," asserts Bulat. "We're providing self-limited care here and always refer people back to their primary care physician."

The video conferencing technology is always manned by one of six, board-certified ER doctors who see first-hand, day in and day out, how routine procedures clog crowded ERs. All are fulltime physicians at St. Luke's and have a combined 110 years ER experience.

"In the ER, we're treating people we've never seen before and you can develop a rapport in no time," says Bulat, a Brewster resident. "You need to get information quickly and assess how sick people are. This is just as straight-forward."

It's also one way to alleviate overcrowded ERs, Bulat insists. He says patients have told him the interminable three-hour wait on some days is unfair and unrealistic.

"Emergency rooms are just too overwhelmed," he says. "Too many ambulances, with very sick people, are being diverted because of overcrowding. If we can eliminate some of the routine stuff, ER doctors can focus more on those who need acute care."

His ER experience, coupled with a visit with a friend who's a pharmacist on the Cape, sparked the idea for Bulat.

Sharing a cup of coffee on that summer day, the two began to chat and the pharmacist explained how he was asked repeatedly by vacationers if he could fill a prescription they left behind. Others were looking for something stronger than over-the-counter remedies for various routine ailments.

When Bulat asked his friend how often this happened, he was surprised by the response. He knew from that 1999 summer morning he could help.

"I was stunned by the number of people needing access to health care at the pharmacy," Bulat says. "I wanted to reach for my prescription pad to help out that day."

Bulat, according to Phone DOCTORx senior project manager Brenden Hayden, is a "health care visionary" who saw a challenge and wanted to make a difference and also make a business work. "He saw what needed to be done and assembled the team," Hayden adds.

The medicine has always been the top priority, Hayden says, explaining why it took almost two years to develop the concept. He says the group didn't want to rush into the venture until the technology and medical protocols were ironed out. The doctors spent an additional six months testing after all the pieces were put in place.

They know there are skeptics quick to be critical about telemedicine and recognize this isn't for everyone. Bulat insists the best way to alleviate concerns of the medical community is to have people come to the kiosk. He says he is confident once people "see and feel" the operation their comfort level will increase.

"Tele-medicine is here to stay and has been around for a while," Bulat says.

"It's just like when clinics came about," adds Hayden. "Some thought it was bad medicine. This is just another evolution of that. We're prepared for the critics."

Shea says the doctor's group has an "outstanding record of care and we won't deal with things we're uncomfortable with on phone video."

They are also well aware about the potential for fraud and have put a number of measures in place. For example, they cannot write prescriptions for "schedule 2" narcotics — OxyContin and Percocet, for example. They won't fill prescriptions for

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more than 12 pills at a time. They also believe keeping a video record will also deter criminals who might try to cheat the system.

"Being on camera clearly dissuades drug users from trying to fraud the system" Bulat says.

Shea also points out that since May not

one patient has come in seeking pain medicine.

All three say they have been pleasantly surprised by the response and are moving ahead with plans to open other locations, creating a ring around Boston. Beyond that, they are looking to other parts of Massachusetts with possible expansion in New Hampshire, Connecticut and Rhode

Island. They say the Stop & Shop Companies would like kiosks in all stores where there are pharmacies.

They're also not ruling out schools, colleges, and companies who might want to provide medical care. Future plans also include trying to get some insurance providers to cover the \$35 fee.,

But the group doesn't want to get ahead of itself. The relationship with Stop & Shop continues to grow and Hayden says the cooperate effort is working well.

"When we looked at where we could place the kiosk we examined a variety of settings. All of the settings were good, but the retail chain pharmacy was the winner," Hayden says. "The retail chain pharmacy also offers the 'one stop shopping' experience which most consumers are looking for. Our relationship with Stop & Shop started with, of all things, a 'cold call.' After the meeting we demonstrated the prototype of our software and it was the birth of a great relationship."\*

Phone DOCTORx hours are 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Saturday; 9-6 Sunday For further information, you can call the office at 1-508-880-0564

## The medical team

Here's a quick look at who makes up the Phone DOCTORx.

**Paul Bulat, MD, FACEP**  
 President and CEO, PhoneDOCTORx  
 Undergraduate: Holy Cross College  
 Medical School: University of Massachusetts Medical School  
 Board Certifications: Emergency Medicine  
 \*Years in Practice- 22  
 \*Fellow of the American College of Emergency Physicians  
 \*Past President of the Massachusetts College of Emergency Physicians

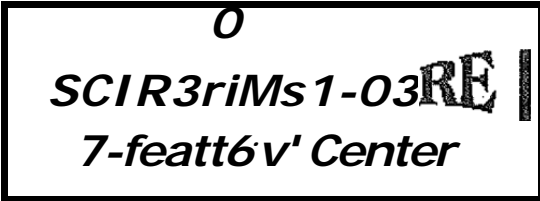
**Daniel J. Shea, MD, FACEP**  
 Chief Medical Officer, PhoneDOCTORx  
 Undergraduate: St. Anselm College  
 Medical School: Georgetown University School of Medicine  
 Board Certifications: Emergency Medicine, Internal Medicine  
 \*Years in Practice- 21  
 \*Fellow of the American College of Emergency Physicians  
 \*Past President of the Massachusetts College of Emergency Physicians

**William Harding, MD, FACEP**  
 Undergraduate- Williams College  
 Medical School- University of Vermont  
 College of Medicine  
 Board Certifications: Emergency Medicine, Internal Medicine.  
 \*Years in Practice- 24  
 \*Fellow of the American College of Emergency Physicians

**David Fuerman, DO, FACEP**  
 Undergraduate: Ohio State University  
 Medical School: College of Osteopathic Medicine and Surgery, Des Moines, Iowa  
 Board Certifications: Emergency Medicine  
 \*Years in Practice- 20  
 Fellow of the American College of Emergency Physicians

**Joanne Cameron, MD, FACEP**  
 Undergraduate: Harvard University  
 Medical School: University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill  
 Board Certifications: Pediatric Emergency Medicine, Internal Medicine, Pediatrics  
 \*Years in Practice-13  
 \*Fellow of the American College of Emergency Physicians

**Henry Gravel, MD, FACEP**  
 Undergraduate: St. Anselm College  
 Medical School: Georgetown University School of Medicine  
 Board Certifications: Emergency Medicine  
 \*Years in Practice- 28  
 \*Fellow of the American College of Emergency Physicians



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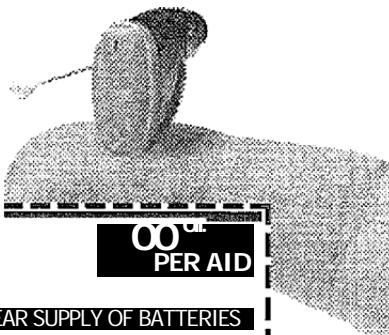
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