

A major computer manufacturer has launched a campaign for the use of 2D barcode labeling on drug supply bottles. The campaign targets drug manufacturers and explains the benefits of having additional information coded in the label to allow for supply chain control. While this is an important consideration, we must also look at the potential benefits to the pharmacy as well.

The 2D label is essentially a series of vertically stacked barcodes which can be read by a laser scanner equipped with the appropriate software. It contains a pattern used for code alignment. The 2D barcode can be thought of as essentially a very long standard barcode. Where a standard barcode for a drug supply bottle will only contain the NDC code, a 2D label could also contain the lot number, the expiration date and many other pieces of information. While this information certainly will help to control the distribution of the drugs, it could also provide the pharmacy with other very real benefits.

Imagine being able to read the expiration date on a supply bottle before it is used for a script. If a customer comes in and asks for a seldom-prescribed drug, the pharmacist could inadvertently fill the script with expired product and not know it. The 2D label prevents this from happening, because the scanner can flag the expiration date for the pharmacist.

Another potential benefit that is not immediately apparent is the use of the lot number in a system that counts pills by weight. The FDA has stated that drugs may be safely counted by weight if the average piece weight for the drug is established using pills from the same lot number. The piece weight distribution within a single lot number is much tighter than the distribution between different lot numbers. Having the lot number information on the 2d label would allow the system to store different average piece weights for different lot numbers. This prevents average piece weight discrepancies from occurring.

A major benefit of counting by weight over many robotic and optical counting systems is the prevention of cross-contamination. Because the pills are poured directly from the supply bottle into the customer's vial, there is no possibility of medications becoming cross-contaminated. The least expensive, safest and quickest method of counting pills is by weight, provided that an accurate average piece weight for the medication is stored in the system. The use of 2D labeling guarantees that an accurate average piece weight can always be provided.

