



# Finding the Perfect Fit



▲ Since its founding in 1946, Lehan Drugs has been family owned and operated. Pictured from left (above) are Briana Lehan, Jon Lehan, Terri (Lehan) Hettel, Tim Lehan, Ann Lehan, and Patrick Lehan.

## Fulfilling a need with a women's health department and boutique

By Chris Linville

### In many ways, Lehan Drugs

is the epitome of a family owned independent community pharmacy. The business started when brothers Emory and James Lehan Sr., both pharmacists, opened their first store in DeKalb, Ill., in 1946.

Through the years, the pharmacy became a landmark in DeKalb, a town of some 45,000 residents and home to Northern Illinois University. Now in its fourth generation, there are seven members of the Lehan family helping run the business, which also has a location in nearby Sycamore.

Lehan Drugs provides most of the offerings available in many community pharmacies, including immunizations, medication therapy management, custom-

ized medication compounding, one-on-one medication counseling, a weekly pill organization service, home medical supplies, and free delivery. It dispenses between 300–350 prescriptions daily, and does almost 3,000 vaccinations annually.

Despite its success, the Lehan family isn't content to rest on its laurels. Sensing a void in specialized health options for women, Lehan Drugs began offering women's health products to its patients more than 10 years ago. It began with compression stockings, and has continued to evolve into an entire department, providing services and products to meet a wide array of women's health needs in the community. For women battling breast cancer, it offers education and fittings for post-mastectomy products and related accessories. The women's health department and boutique also provides maternity and postpartum support for women during and after pregnancy, along with compression garments for women with lymphedema, varicose veins, edema, and other venous conditions.

"It all began by simply listening to our customers," says Terri (Lehan) Hettel, the pharmacy's store manager and a certified fitting specialist. "We found that our patients suffering from breast cancer had no local options for post-mastectomy bras and prostheses while undergo-

ing treatment. We were determined to find out what we needed to do to meet that need for them."

It was also a personal experience that motivated her. "My grandmother Marie Lehan had breast cancer. So knowing what she went through, and knowing what others are going through, it was something we needed in the community."

In the fall of 2010, Lehan Drugs held the grand opening for its women's health department and boutique inside Lehan Drugs' DeKalb location. The 2,500-square-foot space has an expanded line of post-mastectomy forms, apparel, and accessories. Additionally, two dressing rooms were created, along with an education area.

"The area that is now the boutique was originally part of our gift and card department," says Jim Lehan, the pharmacy's business operations director. "We remodeled, adding the two dressing rooms for consultations and fittings, and gave the boutique the space and feel it needed."

Lehan says that initially they weren't sure they were going to be able to fill the area but now jokingly says, "We don't know if we have enough room."

### Transition Stage

The women's health department is another step in a conscious decision by Lehan Drugs to move away from the



*Lehan Drugs' women's health department and boutique offers a full line of products and services. Board certified fitters (from left) Cindy Hoffman, Sally Smoltich, and Terri (Lehan) Hettel combine technical expertise and compassion when caring for patients.*

traditional retail pharmacy model. In the early days, the pharmacy had a soda fountain and a restaurant. By the 1960s, the store began selling a wide variety of products, including the usual drugstore fare, along with televisions, cameras, photofinishing, cosmetics, and toys.

In 2000, owner Tim Lehan (Jim's father and Terri's brother) guided the pharmacy through a major remodel, setting the stage for its current incarnation. The facelift paved the way for a full scale home medical equipment department and a modernization of the pharmacy area. The new look and expanded services aimed to separate Lehan Drugs from the numerous chain pharmacies coming to the area.

Lehan noted that in the past, the pharmacy also sold cigarettes, which seemed counterproductive to the new mission.

"We decided that it would be hypocritical that we were selling cigarettes as a pharmacy," he says. "Even though we knew we were going to lose some money, we decided to get rid of them completely. That kind of put the ball in motion. We're in the health care business, and our patients' health is the most important thing. That's what we need to be focusing on."

"We knew that the women's health area was quickly running out of space, and we had it in an area that wasn't very private," says Hettel. "We needed more private space, and the way that the store was set up it was already divided out for us. It was pretty easy to figure out where the area was going to be."

Lehan says that post-mastectomy products were the initial focus, but adds, "I don't think we realized all the other niche products and needs that customers would be asking about that we would be able to provide."

"We wanted to bring in post-mastectomy products for sure," Hettel says, "But we also wanted to be able to provide services and products for all women's health needs. We now have bras for women who are hard to fit in a traditional retail store. We carry self-wicking sleepwear that makes hot flashes more tolerable, skin care lines, hats that block ultraviolet rays and custom fit swimsuits, among other things."

Hettel says that another effective product that her department carries is post-operative camisoles. As she explains it, instead of a patient having a drainage tube being attached with tape onto her skin on the stomach after surgery, the post-operative camisole offered by

## A Family Affair

Lehan Drugs was created by pharmacist brothers Emory and James Lehan Sr. in 1946. Now in its fourth generation, seven members of the Lehan family are involved in the business

**Tim and Ann Lehan**—(Pharmacists and Owners)

**Terri (Lehan) Hettel**—Tim's sister (Store Manager/  
Certified Fitting Specialist)

**Patrick Lehan**—Tim's brother (Home Medical  
Equipment Manager)

**James Lehan**—Tim and Ann's son (Business  
Operations Director)

**Jon Lehan**—Tim and Ann's son (Pharmacist  
Manager)

**Briana Lehan**—Jon's wife (Home Medical Sales  
and Operations)

Lehan Drugs has drainage bags that are detachable with velcro. "Our product lines continue to evolve based on the health needs of our patients," Hettel added.

Lehan Drugs also has a presence at the cancer center at a local hospital (part of the Kishwaukee Health System).

"We provide information, sample products and literature to give to patients treated there," Hettel says. "We also work with the staff at the cancer center to make sure that patients with questions or concerns can have their needs met during their visit to the doctor."

## Building on Relationships

Lehan says that Lehan Drugs has built equity with its 65-year history in the community. That tends to pay dividends when promoting new ventures such as the women's health boutique.

"A lot of what we do is doctor and provider-centric. It is crucial we are able to let providers know what we have available. The fact that we've been around for more than 60 years makes building those relationships easier. When providers have confidence in you, they are more likely to listen if you think a certain therapy for a patient could be improved or a service or product would improve quality of life. With the cancer center, having that comfort level with the physicians and nurses is a huge asset to the department."



▲ Women's health and home medical equipment are cornerstones of Lehan Drug's move toward a full-scale patient care model.

Having a presence at the cancer center also helps in coordinating services.

"We communicate regularly with the cancer center's nurse navigator, and she tells us what's going on with the patients so that we have a clinical understanding of their situation," Hettel says. "It makes an easier transition for the patient, knowing that everybody's on the same page when it comes to their diagnosis, treatment, and recovery."

Hettel knows that many breast cancer patients have a million things thoughts racing through their minds as they try to process and absorb a life-altering event, and she wants to assure them that everyone on the staff cares, and that they have products that can help their path to healing.

"They often come in not knowing [what type of options they have]," Hettel says. "They get hit with the diagnosis, and they don't really know where to go from there. We are there to make sure they are heading in the right direction."

### Fitting Certifications

Hettel says that Lehan Drugs has three board certified fitters on staff, and all have gone through an extensive certification program. To become certified, a prospective fitter must have at least 500 documented hours with patients in fittings and consultations with patients. Fitters must also pass formal tests. Lehan Drug's fitters take a training class through companies such as Amoena, which manufactures a number of the post-mastectomy products that the department carries. Hettel explains that

there are beginning courses and advanced courses. She also says that fitters have to be board certified because of its ACHC (Accreditation Commission for Health Care, Inc.) accreditation. Her employees are certified through the American Board for Certification in Orthotics, Prosthetics, and Pethordics, and she says the entire process takes about a year.

The changing focus of the business extends to the employees as well. Hettel says that fitting specialist Cindy Hoffman has been with Lehan Drugs for more than 30 years.

"Cindy was in charge of our photo department," Hettel says. "She's always been so customer-oriented, so she was such a wonderful fit—literally—for that department. She is the most experienced fitter, and has been doing this for more 10 years. Our other certified fitters are Sally Smoltich and myself."

And being patient-oriented is critical, Hettel says. "Whoever is hired into that department, has to be a compassionate listener. That's just part of it."

Hettel says that when a patient comes in, particularly one who has been diagnosed with cancer, a fitting specialist will meet with that patient for a counseling session, which usually lasts about an hour.

"You sit down and take time with them and guide them through this journey," she says. "You let them talk to you, and again you listen. Then you start building friendships and relationships with them, and your referrals come from that.

"They have questions. They ask how long it's going to take. We try to give them honest answers. For example, we do not do any fittings until at least six weeks after surgery because of the swelling that goes on at the site. We are also seeing a lot of lumpectomies recently [surgery in which only the tumor and some surrounding tissue is removed]. Even with the procedures that they are using, they still are going to possibly need a prosthesis to fill in an area where they have taken the breast tissue."

### Unexpected Bonus

When asked what the department's top selling items are, Hettel lists compression medical legwear, along with bras and other prosthetic products. Hot flash pajamas and other sleepwear are also popular, along with swimwear.

"We sell quite a bit of that," she says. "When we first

started selling swimsuits and put a sign out front that said 'swimsuits,' customers would come in and say 'What are you doing selling swimsuits in a drugstore?' But I've got these same people coming back the next year buying swimsuits, even those customers who have not had a mastectomy."

Hettel says the key to the success is that the suits have a good fit, are well made, and comfortable. They can be worn in the ocean or in a chlorinated pool, and the colors won't fade.

"We didn't realize it would be such a popular item" she says. "We tried it and women started putting them on. They'll take six or seven in the dressing rooms thinking only one will fit, but every one of them fit correctly. It has to do with the sizing. It is a perfect fit."

Lehan says that the staff didn't initially realize that many of the products (such as the swimsuits or the bras made specifically for post mastectomy patients), are created in such a comfortable manner that they appeal to all women regardless of their health status.

"They are just as nice for women who have not had mastectomies," he says. "We were assuming all of these products were just going to be for cancer patients. But in reality that's not the case."

Hettel also points out, "We have people coming in at 21 and all the way up to 90 years old who buy the swimsuits, so there's no middle of the road. We are getting all age groups. We also have a line of jewelry, so there are a lot of things that bring them into the department."

The business also hopes to gain market share through crossover customers. Lehan notes that there are plenty of pharmacies in the area, but he thinks that Lehan Drug's focus on home medical and women's health is a trump card.

"On average we see anywhere from between 100 and 150 new home medical patients per month," Lehan says. "I'm guessing that at least half of them aren't currently pharmacy patients. So that's about 50 to 75 patients coming through the door for home medical equipment that aren't pharmacy patients. That's a tremendous opportunity to make them customers. So we send out follow up postcards to new patients, thanking them for coming in, and stressing the services that we offer."

## Looking Ahead

Lehan says that as the department's customer base and the



▲ Private consultation areas were designed to provide a relaxed and comfortable setting for patients.

number of patients continues to grow, he would like to increase the number of in-house educational programs.

"We did a nice program during our grand opening week when we had a renowned breast cancer speaker come in for a group of about 75 women," he says. "That was really well received, and to have more programs like that for these women would be something we would like to continue doing."

"We've condensed some items so we have the space where we can move the mobile home medical type products such as lift chairs and power wheelchairs off the floor pretty easily to make room for presentations and speakers. We can seat about 100 comfortably."

Lehan says his short-term goal is to "have the department be self-sustaining. Right now our staff that does women's health also helps out with the rest of the home medical department in terms of intake on patients and those types of things. But we'd like to get to the point where that's all they are doing [women's health]. We're getting close."

Based on some of the feedback the department has received, that day might arrive soon.

"I think we've always had great relationships with our patients, but especially dealing with the cancer patients now," Lehan says. With Hettel listening nearby and laughing, he adds, "Terri will be out in the community, and people will just walk up to her and give her a hug. She judges how well she's doing by how many hugs she gets" *ap*

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