PWAs vs. Y2K

Drug companies vamp up for millennium

July 1, 1999 By Scott Hess

With Y2K rumors sweeping every computer-governed industry from sprinkler systems to weapon deployment, is it safe to say that the operating table will be no place for a PWA when 1999 becomes 2000? Docs attending a medical seminar in Denver this spring were advised to “err on the side of caution” and avoid scheduling elective—not emergency—surgery for the first days of the new millennium.

The drug industry, however, anticipates no interruption in its regular state of affairs when the year changes, according to a recent Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America (PhRMA) survey, which found that drug companies have been eyeing the clock for about three years and are prepared to keep their supply flowing when Y2K pops.

All 24 companies surveyed by PhRMA said they have Y2K plans in place and expect to spend a combined $1.75 billion in the coming months to stamp out any technical bugs. “Success in meeting the Y2K challenge depends not only on our industry but on other links in the supply chain and on patients,” said PhRMA President Alan F. Holmer. “Hoarding and stockpiling meds could create a greater threat to the supply than any computer glitch.”

For TAG’s Spencer Cox, dishing out Y2K advice is like telling people to look out for lightning. “Nobody’s able to predict how much will go down,” he said. “But it can’t hurt to plan for disruptions in normal service: I’ll fill my ’scrip on December 30 to assure a month’s supply.”

The AIDS Treatment Data Network’s Richard Jefferys has so far received few Y2K-related calls. “I don’t mean to minimize the issue, but the whole industry is not going to break down when the year changes,” he said, noting that pharmaceuticals have experience getting meds where they’re needed during crises like hurricanes, fires and wars.