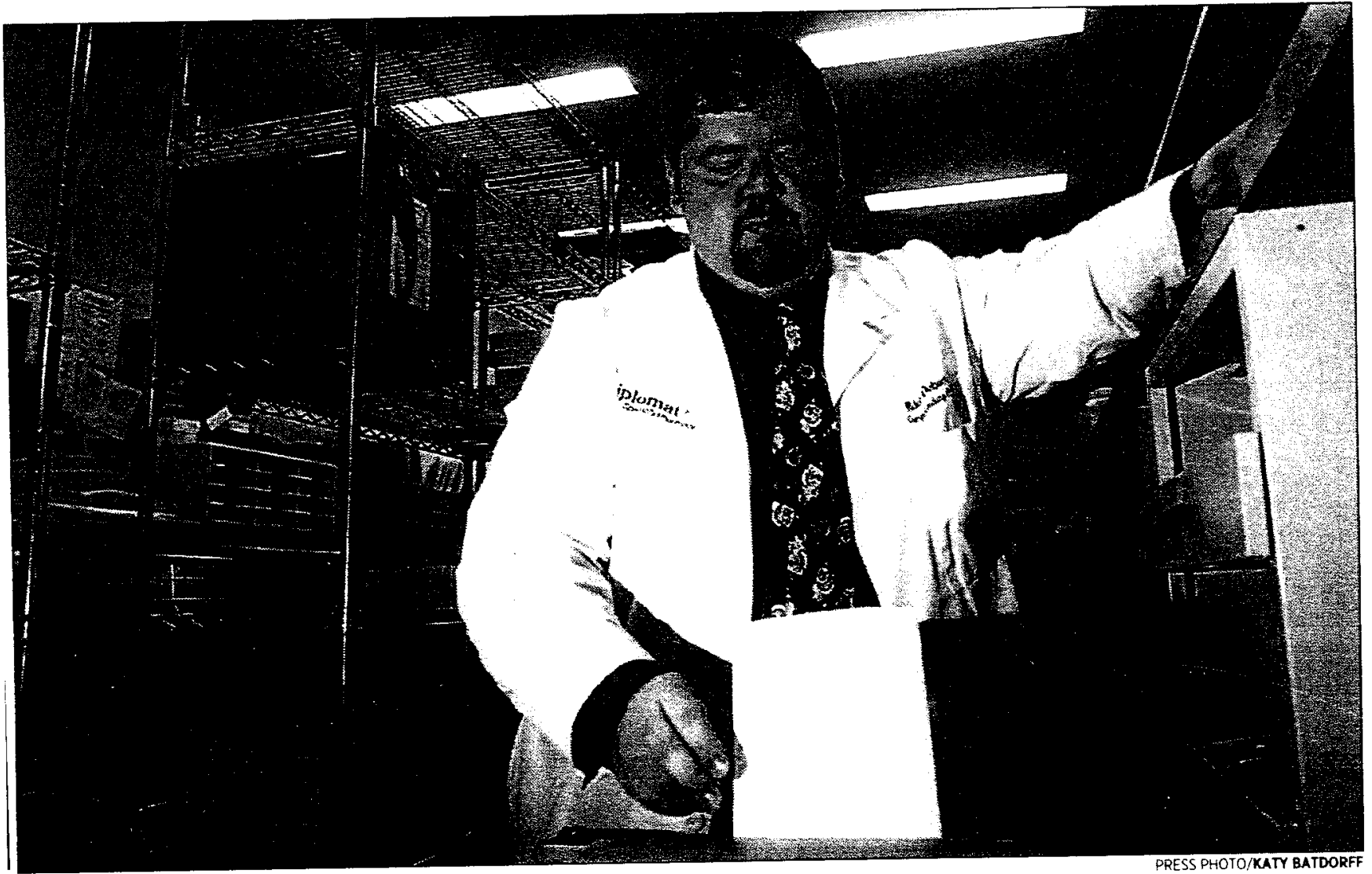


PROTECTING YOUR PRIVACY



PRESS PHOTO/KATY BATDORFF

Into shreds: Pharmacist Mike DeBoer shreds documents Monday at Diplomat Pharmacy. Disposing of prescription bottles, labels and prescriptions with customer names on them is part of the pharmacy's practice to protect privacy.

Local pharmacies take care to guard patient records

Local companies use shredders, sealed black bags to keep documents from falling into wrong hands

BY MARY RADIGAN
THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS

GRAND RAPIDS — Diplomat Pharmacy trains its employees to "shred as you go" when they are finished with written information covering prescriptions or other patient records.

Meijer Inc. has sealed black bags locked in secret areas of its 176 stores where prescriptions and other vulnerable pharmacy material is stored until a person in authority produces a key and helps escort the trash to an authorized hauler.

At Kay Pharmacy, 2178 Plainfield Ave. NE, general trash and information-sensitive material is separated in the drugstore, according to owner Mike Koelzer.

Employees all are trained under the Health Insurance Portability & Accountability Act regulations, and everything from faxes to refill lists go into sealed bags and right to a HIPAA-compliant hauler. Nothing is in public view.

Spartan Stores Inc. has secured trash compactors at some of its pharmacies and shredders at others.

By the end of the month, the Byron

Township-based grocer will begin using a shredding company to handle pharmacy records at all of its stores in Michigan and Ohio.

These are some of the practices area pharmacies have in place to keep sensitive material out of the wrong hands.

Incidents of identity theft and robberies across the country as well as compliance with HIPAA have ramped up patient protection efforts.

Walgreens Co., CVS Corp. and Rite Aid Corp., the country's three largest pharmacy chains, recently said they would change or review the way they dispose of patient information after a variety of patient records were found carelessly thrown in unlocked trash bins in several cities.

"Patient protection is a top priority for us," said Mike DeBoer, a pharmacist with Diplomat at 214 E. Fulton St. "We have to keep prescriptions for seven years, but even those are kept in a secured area that no one would ever find."

Diplomat co-owner Steve Chaffee said patient information is never left exposed to any type of public viewing in the pharmacy.

Labeled pill bottles and other patient materials leave the building in bags supplied by a shredding company whose contract guarantees confidentiality and an uninterrupted chain of disposal.

"The shredding service costs us a little more for disposal, but we take that extra measure," Chaffee said. "Nothing is ever just thrown out."

Diplomat contracts with Shred

Right Inc., based in West Branch and owned by three pharmacists.

Their shredding business was started 11 years ago when the pharmacists merged their drugstores and discovered one building with an attic full of old patient records and no secure means of disposal.

"Now we can shred on site or take our locked trucks to secure and locked areas for the disposal," said Rick Braidwood, co-owner and president of Shred Right.

"We know how critically important it is to protect information."

At Meijer Inc., pharmacy material is sealed in solid black bags, said Stacie Behler, spokeswoman for the Walker-based retailer.

"The bags are never left unattended and are not accessible to anyone from outside of the building," she said. "We look at this frequently and (keep) reinforcing our procedures."

"Nothing is ever left in a Dumpster."

Spartan has had no patient privacy issues, but wants to move further in ensuring "absolute confidentiality," said Jeanne Norcross, company spokeswoman.

"All of our compacted material is taken away intact and the material is secured between the stores and the site where it's taken for disposal," she said.

"We're going another step and will begin using a shredding service (for all pharmacy locations) in the next few weeks."

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