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PACKAGING AUTOMATION - UK MANUFACTURER OF BLISTER PACKAGING EQUIPMENT

Blister packaging - a term used for heat-sealing a pre-formed tray or pouch with a pre-cut lid - is only made possible, due to a handful of specialist companies that are able to produce the equipment needed to complete the task. Knutsford-based Packaging Automation is the long-time market leader in heat sealing and produces an extensive range of heat-sealing machinery suitable for use in blister packaging.

The company has almost 40 years' experience of meeting the requirements, however stringent, from a range of medical users, including some of the top names in the field.

When the operating theatre technician opens a replacement hip or some other "spare part" at the forefront of modern surgery, for the consultant surgeon, there is a need for instant recognition that the packaging is secure. They need total reassurance that the package is sterile and this is where blister packaging comes into its own.

So when Packaging Automation set out to win over medical companies to its equipment, it was determined that it would provide machines which met the strict hygiene, health and safety standards laid down by the likes of the British Medical Association, European Union and the United States Food and Drug Administration - perhaps the most fastidious organisation across the globe.

On all the blister packaging machines which leave Packaging Automation's spacious and modern manufacturing plant, consistency of seal quality is guaranteed through in-built temperature control mechanisms and a seal dwell time indicator.

Seal parameters can be set and accurately monitored and they can also be adjusted with ease if required. A pressure transducer on the seal cylinder measures and records the force applied and if it goes outside the pre-set parameters, the pack is rejected. Accountability is therefore total.

But in addition, the stipulation for keeping manufacturing records for 30 years - in case of product defect - is also met, by use of an in-built printer which provides a readout copy showing when each item was packed, the name of the operative and the seal pressure which was used. Packaging Automation is quick to point out, again, that accountability is total.

Most of the company's range of machinery is suitable for use in blister packing from the manually operated PA217, the rotary or sliding-based PA 210, a basic machine with low speeds, through the PA 214 and the semi-automatic PA 178 to the fully automatic rotary machine, the PA2016. The PA236, which is an integral conveyor-fed machine is most often used for larger volumes and longer runs of the same pack.

Packaging Automation's record for quality and well engineered equipment is supported by a range of top customers, all more than willing to provide glowing testimonials.

DePuy CMW, one of the world's foremost manufacturers of bone cement for use in hip replacement surgery obviously has to meet some of the most exacting hygiene regulations. The cement is made up of a number of components including a liquid which is contained in blister-packed glass ampoules.

The company wanted to increase production speed without compromising the quality of the seals and found the ideal solution in the PA 236. It increased the speed by almost 100 per cent, while maintaining guaranteed seal quality.

A spokesman for the Blackpool-based company said: "The system has been great. It has also met all our other specifications including being suitable for operation in a clean room environment and total product sterility. Packaging Automation has always responded to our requests with speed and efficiency. The company has an exemplary after-sales reputation and in my experience it is justified."

In another part of the DePuy group, Leeds-based DePuy International also makes use of Packaging Automation's skills and technology. It has PA214s - and has had them for over 20 years - for use with up to 40 different blister packs for its medical implants like hip and knee replacements.

The company has recently taken delivery of a new model which a spokesman said would help it keep ahead of the opposition and the governing bodies with their strict regulations.

Consider too reliability and long life. Packaging Automation has conducted a nation-wide search for the oldest of its machines still in use with both the longest-runner and the second longest involved in day-by-day medical applications.

Abbott Laboratories bought their first PA178 in 1983 and praise its "simplicity, robustness and ease of use." JRI (Joint Replacement Instrumentation) Manufacturing bought their PA178 a year later and like its precursor it is used every day - clocking up as many as 45,000 blister packs annually. "Reliable" is the instant and simple epithet employed for it by JRI.

Samantha Penn, Packaging Automation's Commercial Manager is not surprised at either the plaudits heaped on Packaging Automation or the longevity of its products. "As a leading producer of specialist heat sealing machinery for the medical market - and food producers too - we are at the forefront of a very complex business. We have been involved in blister packing for nearly four decades and have always worked very closely with everybody we come into contact with from manufacturers to retailers and packaging suppliers. We have built up an extensive knowledge of what is required in the medical field and have an excellent track record of delivering it," she said.

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