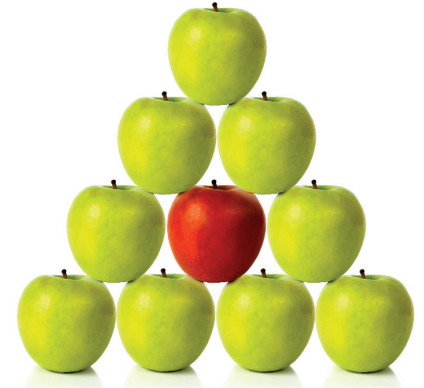


CONCIERGE MEDICINE: APPLES TO APPLES, THIS PRACTICE MODEL STANDS OUT



HOUSE CALL
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There's a lot to dislike about going to the doctor these days. It starts with the phone call and plodding through the impersonal "push one, push two" of the automated answering system. Then the waiting starts...waiting weeks for an appointment, waiting in the waiting room, waiting in the examining room...All that for a typical 10 minutes of face time with the doctor, who really seems as if he's trying to listen but is so obviously anxious to get to the next patient that you decide not to mention what you're really worried about.

-U.S. News & World Report

Everyone has their tipping point

As a physician, mine arrived the day a health maintenance organization representative introduced a concept called "group patient examinations."

Why see only one patient at a time, he reasoned, when seeing a dozen patients with similar complaints-herded together into a common examination area-would be so much more efficient?

Prior to that moment, I wanted to believe HMOs couldn't sink lower than they already had. For years they had blurred the line between doctors and those with far less training, dubbing us all "health care providers." For years, they had pressured physicians to limit exams to 7-minutes; a ridiculously short length of time.

With this ghastly new idea, the unthinkable had become reality. For public relations purposes, it might sound good. After all, patients would be given a one hour appointment. In reality those 60-minutes would be shared by 12 patients. Why allow for a 7-minute exam when surely 5-minutes each would do?

Listening to this representative, I finally reached my limit. I hadn't completed 4 years of medical school, a 3-year residency in internal medicine, a 2-year infectious disease fellowship, and over 2 decades as a dedicated physician to have a middleman tell me how to do my job. I opted out as a so-called "health care provider."

I wanted to be a doctor again.

I set sail on my own.

Almost two years later, as a concierge physician, I am happily practicing medicine the way it should always be practiced: putting the individual patient's healthcare needs first. Now I work for my patients, not for insurance companies. Patients pay an annual participation fee-about the cost of a daily Starbucks latte-and I devote my time and energy to giving them outstanding health care.

Each patient receives a comprehensive annual wellness examination, a nutritional consultation with a registered dietician, fast track

access to sub-specialists, coordination of care with those sub-specialists; speedy authorization for diagnostic procedures, same-day appointments, and the ability to reach me 24/7 via my personal cell phone.

Clearly, round-the-clock access to me makes busy patients' lives less stressful. I recently received a 6am phone call from a corporate-executive patient who had traveled to the east coast and forgotten to pack her medications. Because all my patients' records are stored and updated electronically, within minutes I had transmitted her prescription needs to a pharmacy near her hotel. When I called the pharmacist to confirm that everything was in order, he laughed. "Yes, it's all here and it's great. How'd you do that so quickly?"

Even from hundreds of miles away, this patient had received top notch care.

I could cite dozens of examples like hers; daily medical marvels thanks to concierge-style care: the cancer discovered in its earliest stages because a patient had time to discuss symptoms he ordinarily wouldn't have bothered to mention; the heart disease missed on a cardiologist's stress test but picked up by me in further testing; the patient diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome who, in fact, had nothing of the sort.

There is no substitute for well-honed expertise and time enough to utilize it.

In a Los Angeles Times opinion piece, concierge internist Albert Fuchs put it this way: *Imagine one morning you're craving something sweet, so you stop by the corner doughnut shop. Turns out the wait is half an hour, the clerk is rude, and, when you finally get it, the doughnut is stale. Would you buy doughnuts there again? Of course not.*

Yet, every day, millions of Americans put up with just that kind of service in their physicians' offices. And they keep going back.

Do you feel like a number instead of an individual with unique healthcare needs? Have you reached your tipping point?

There is a better healthcare choice.

Apples to apples and dollars to doughnuts, concierge medicine makes sense.

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