

Hire Your Own Private Doctor

Physicians finding other ways to offer care

By Deborah Jeanne Sergeant

Want a doctor who really knows you and offers 24/7 availability or even house calls? These options have become reality as physicians reinvent how they provide care.

A few doctors in the area have begun offering alternative ways to deliver care, and not just because they want to enhance their patients' experience.

As margins grow thinner and thinner in the healthcare industry, many providers take on additional patients to receive adequate reimbursement from insurers. Since they can't add more hours to the day, this means that each patient receives less time during visits. Physicians in general also have little opportunity to develop a close patient/doctor relationship. If they increase the number of visits they schedule, they must work longer hours, which affects their quality of life.

All of these factors add up to less satisfaction for doctors and patients. Some have turned to offering retainer-based care, sometimes called concierge medical care.

Physician Anthony Ragusa, fellowship-trained in internal medicine and practicing in Greece, believes that affiliation with MDVIP (www.mdvip.com) for the past year has helped him solve the problem.

"He always wanted to provide the best service to patients, one-on-one care," said Blaise Ragusa, the physician's brother and the practice administrator. "He wanted the patient to participate as much as possible and spend as much time as he could so the patient knew what to

do for his health."

MDVIP, a patient-centered wellness program headquartered in Boca Raton, Fla., provides physicians with more direct access to providers for an annual fee. The program focuses on wellness and prevention as keys to good health.

Physician Ragusa tailors preventive plans to help patients stay healthy, including diet, exercise, and monitoring their weight, blood pressure and other vital statistics.

His brother said that patients can call the doctor whenever they like, 24/7. Instead of waiting weeks — even months — for appointments, patients can get in touch with the doctor any time they want. "If required, he'll do a home visit or see the patient at the hospital for no extra charge. He's always had a calling for caring for people," the physician's brother said.

Through his affiliation with MDVIP, Ragusa can link to top specialists nationwide to consult on tougher cases. MDVIP is not insurance, but he participates with insurance and bills them for services delivered on-site.

Patients pay about \$136 monthly in addition to maintaining the health insurance required to comply with the Affordable Care Act.

The fee includes preventive care, 24/7 access via phone or email, and regular maintenance visits for ongoing health concerns.

Serving the senior population

Some patients of physician Luis Postigo can remember the days of doctors making house calls.

For the past decade, Postigo,



Some doctors in the area can provide you with home visits and 24/7 availability — and it's less expensive than you think

has served as a geriatric specialist who provides house calls to seniors 65 and older at no extra charge. Though not a retainer-based provider, Postigo diverts from traditional medical practices by taking his care wherever the patients are, home or hospital — a big departure from the traditional model of patients lining waiting rooms to bring their needs to the doctor.

Postigo sustains his business without grants or extra income by keeping his expenses low. For example, he doesn't see patients at his office — ever. He doesn't employ nurse practitioners or physician assistants but sees all his patients directly. He doesn't pay for an answering service, but takes patient calls personally when no one's in the office. Technology also lends a hand by helping him keep electronic records and order X-rays or blood work on his computer.

Some of his clients also use email and texting to keep him up-to-speed on their health. He views telemedicine as the wave of the future.

Postigo accepts all insurance.

"I've been able to make it financially success," he said. "I like what I do. There is a group of patients that are not so sick they need to go to a nursing home but are not so well that they can go driving around. Or they don't want to bother their children to take them.

"I not only save the family money, but I save money for the government to pay for someone to take care of them. It's a win-win situation."

Though he doesn't receive the fees that retainer-based doctors receive, Postigo said that his job satisfaction makes his medical model work for him.

"I think house calls and patient interactions will continue to change a lot," Postigo said.