

CONCIERGE MEDICINE:

A COMPREHENSIVE WAY TO DELIVER HEALTH CARE

By Mark Hudson, Connected Health

IT ALL STARTED WITH A BROKEN FOOT.

When Betty Rich, Co-Founder and CEO of Connected Health, broke her foot (a big deal to someone who is 4'11" and loves her heels) she thought that her primary care physician should know. However, she knew that a call to her doctor would not get her past the first gate keeper in his office; after all, she wasn't making a payment or an appointment, and she'd get hustled off the phone so the busy staff could move on to other patients. Still, she thought to herself, "shouldn't he know that I have a broken foot? After all, isn't your primary care doctor supposed to be 'in charge' of you?"

With a long background in specialty pharmacy providing medications to patients who needed a relationship, not just a prescription, in order to have the best outcome possible, Rich knew something better could and should exist. She envisioned a place where an honest relationship between a patient and doctor could grow; a practice where there were absolutely no time restrictions and patients had unlimited access to their primary physician. Her solution became Connected Health, the kind of concierge medicine facility that more patients are seeing popping up across Pennsylvania.

While Connected Health is the first concierge practice in Pittsburgh offering pharmacy, fitness and nutrition, concierge practices are growing across the country. Much of that movement is being fueled by both physicians and patients. Physicians are fed up with what some privately call "assembly-line medicine" in which they get paid based on the number of patients they see per day. Many of those same doctors don't want to feel rushed through their appointments. Similarly, patients don't want to feel like a number. They want to lock into a close relationship with a trusted physician who will do what's right for them instead of what's right according to the payer. In the

current insurance-driven system, physicians are penalized financially for spending more time with patients. Concierge medicine fixes this problem.

While some concierge and direct primary care practices offer 24/7 access via cash fees for service, Connected Health has innovated a new way to deliver proactive and preventative concierge medicine all under one roof. For instance, at its Wexford, Pa., location patients are given unprecedented time not just with a primary care physician, but they also meet with a team of other experts that are all collaborating on their behalf. Those experts include a health coach, a pharmacist, a nutritionist and a personal fitness trainer. The collaboration is meant to ensure the patient has a care plan that is designed specifically for his or her unique needs. Rich thinks this helps improve patient outcomes. How could it not? And we are now starting to see research that shows this kind of team-based medicine works.

A recent British Medical Journal study of a direct primary care (DPC)/concierge provider Qliance found that their patients experienced significantly better outcomes than similar patients who received primary care in the traditional way. Qliance patients experienced:

- 35 percent fewer hospitalizations
- 65 percent fewer emergency department visits
- 66 percent fewer specialist visits
- 82 percent fewer surgeries

Savings can be considerable. In a study of results of MD Value in Prevention, the decrease in preventable hospital use (admissions and re-admissions) alone saved \$2,551 per patient, which is more than the cost of a typical concierge/DPC membership fee.

Patients also believe in this approach. "Dr. Andy (Dr. Andrew DeMarco) is responsible for what I believe to be life-saving decisions

for me. Not once, not twice, but three times," says Bob R. a Connected Health patient. "With the health issues I have faced, I can't imagine how frustrating it would be trying to get appointments in a timely fashion, to be informed of the best specialists, and to not have a friend like Dr. Andy walk with me on this journey. If you want a true health 'quarterback' who truly knows and who truly cares about you, I'd urge you to go to Connected Health and join today."

Connected Health members pay an annual fee (less than a years' worth of your daily venti skim lattes) to join and there are no copays, deductibles or co-insurance for most or all services. Care management and care coordination are included and managed by a dedicated health coach as are consultations and access to a nutritionist, pharmacist and personal trainer. A gym membership and spa-like locker rooms are included for those who want to work out as well. Patients receive 24/7 access to the physician for office visits, emails and phone calls and texts, and are offered same-day or next-day appointments. There is no "front desk" between members and the doctor. Employers can also participate using Connected Health service as a means to keep their employees healthy and productive and lowering their costs and risks.

So while concierge medicine is a new term and a new way to receive health care, the concept is old-fashioned and growing. Early evidence indicates that it can improve some of the most daunting problems in health care today—problems such as poor care coordination, unaffordable insurance premiums and high levels of frustration and dissatisfaction among patients and doctors.

As Rich says, "We can all sit here and say the system is broken, so why not try to give people an option that's different? We need that time to see and know patients, that community and team who really cares that you are your best self. And I firmly believe that, over time, we will save our patients money."

