

## CONCIERGE MEDICINE

# rebirth of the doctor & patient relationship

**While the New Year will hopefully present a moment to recover from the dizzying whirlwind of the holiday season, it can also serve as a time to take stock of the triumphs and struggles of the previous year.**

Perhaps, like many Americans, you experienced the frustration of attending to your health within the larger-than-life, highly bureaucratic system that makes receiving individual attention nearly impossible. You would not be alone if you believed that this is your only option.

“Conveyor Belt” medicine has become the unfortunate by-product of a healthcare infrastructure in which doctors are saddled with high-cost malpractice insurance rates, low reimbursement rates by insurance companies and Medicare, and declining salaries in the face of growing overhead costs. In order to keep their practices afloat, many physicians build rosters with upwards of 2,500 patients, resulting in very little time to care for the individual. Doctors who work with large groups sometimes face dismissal if they do not serve a designated number of patients. It seems that the days of counting on the family doctor

to make a simple house call are long gone...or are they?

The answer to this question is, increasingly, *no*. Existing simultaneously with the aforementioned state of affairs is the rising trend of concierge medicine. More and more doctors are blazing a trail (or arguably, rediscovering one) outside the confines of the prevailing system, opening private practices in which the billing of insurance companies for services rendered is eschewed for annual fees paid directly by patients. Although they must still have insurance for catastrophic care such as x-rays, medication, visits to specialists and hospitalization, the patient who is one of 150 (rather than 2,000) can count on a significant amount of much deserved attention.

### PATIENTS SHOULD BE SEEN... AND HEARD

**Dr. Robert Taylor of Roseville, who has maintained a private practice for more than 17 years offering same-day appointments, says, "the more time you spend with people, the more you know. It's important to me that my patients**

**feel like and are treated like family."**

According to Dr. Hisana Qamar, co-founder of Q Concierge Physicians in Monterey, his patients receive an appointment within 24 hours of requesting one and enjoy brief waiting room times of less than one minute; each patient receives between one and one-and-a-half-hour-long appointments if necessary. This is a stark contrast, indeed, to the average five- to seven-minute appointment that is increasingly becoming the national standard, and only after a patient has waited for a half hour or more to see his or her doctor.

Given these trends, it is no wonder that, according to the June 2003 issue of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, an analysis of medical care in this country has revealed that only 59.4 percent of all preventative care (i.e., screening exams) is delivered, while only 58.5 percent of follow-up care occurs. It stands to reason that the current face-off between inroads in medicine and rising incidences of life-threatening illness needn't end in tragic statistics, particularly if support of concierge prac-



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tices like Taylor's and Qamar's continues to gain popularity.

## **A STITCH IN TIME SAVES NINE**

**Dr. Robert Nelson of Concierge Physicians of California affirms that talking to and knowing patients when they are healthy is a vital way to diagnose sickness before it gets out of hand.** He believes that prevention must be proactive and spring from a partnership between physician and patient. The house calls that he offers allow him to reach many patients who would otherwise not see a doctor for lack of convenience, thereby increasing the odds that at some point their health will slip through the cracks. Nelson also coordinates visits between his patients and specialists, even accompanying them on their appointments to assist them in choosing one, if necessary, and then providing those specialists with vital, sometimes life-saving information.

## **TRICKLE DOWN ECONOMICS: PRODUCTIVITY AND THE BUSINESS OF HEALTH**

**According to Dr. Taylor, the word concierge hails from France and originally referred to one who served the king so that he could rule the country.**

And although the word now brings to mind, for many, the position of a front desk clerk, he likens concierge doctors to medics on the beaches of Normandy, serving the needs of soldiers so that they can continue to fight. For corporate movers and shakers and busy professionals in particular, time is money. In all truth, however, so is health. Time waits for no one, as the saying goes, but commerce similarly does not cease for personal appointments or unforeseen health crises.

For this reason, Dr. Qamar offers an International Plan that provides for emergency shipment of medicines if a patient is overseas, as well as transportation on an ICU-equipped jet if a patient needs to re-

turn home for care. The son of a diplomat, Dr. Qamar also speaks six languages and utilizes that experience regularly as he and his wife operate the only full-time concierge practice for the Monterey Peninsula and Pebble Beach Resorts. The couple also proudly owns a practice by the name of Qlinix, which cares for the uninsured who are often desperately impacted by their unmet healthcare needs. They founded the clinic because of their conviction that care should be available to everyone. Qamar is also quick to point out that he and his wife would probably not even have the time or the means to accomplish this goal if their resources had been compromised by the prevailing system.

Dr. Nelson of Roseville points out that a growing number of corporations offer concierge care as a recruiting tool. Of special interest to CEOs, concierge care offers the hope of bypassing costly time spent in a waiting room or even in looking for parking when a doctor visit is in order. Dr. Nelson also offers patients CDs of their entire medical record, as well as medication lists, x-rays and EKGs, thereby reducing the risk of medical errors occurring if a patient requires emergency services while on a business trip or vacation.

## **THE HEART OF THE MATTER**

**By the year 2012, some estimates project that Americans are going to spend approximately three trillion dollars on healthcare annually.** As stated earlier, it is a big business, albeit one in which the commodity is the care of human life. Bob Daneke, an 83-year-old patient of Dr. Nelson's and the now retired founder and first CEO of American River Bank, says concierge medicine has vastly and very personally improved his quality of life as a senior citizen living with Parkinson's disease. Coping with the challenges of aging and a formidable condition like Parkinson's leaves many people feeling isolated, afraid and alone, but Daneke affirms that Dr.



Nelson collaborates with him to ensure that this is not the case.

According to Daneke, "it is refreshing to have a doctor who actually visits me and is so attentive to my needs. Previous doctors would have their assistants read my labs to me over the phone. It was simply a case of 'here is what is wrong with you,' with little or no advice given to me beyond that."

Daneke's daughter found Dr. Nelson recently after her father broke his hip. Fed up with the marginal amount of attention she saw him receiving, she wanted to help him secure the best possible care. As a patient of Dr. Nelson's, Daneke recently received a prescription that will help him combat the dry mouth and speech difficulties of his disease. His previous doctor did not even offer him this medication, Daneke believes, for lack of time. More recently, when he realized that he was down to his last two pills for one of his prescriptions that had to be shipped to his pharmacy from Los Angeles, Dr. Nelson picked it up for him and helped facilitate the signing of paperwork that would have posed a great difficulty to Daneke if he was left to contend with it on his own.

Slipping in the shower, another concern

of Daneke's, was also recently addressed by Dr. Nelson when he inspected the shower himself and determined that Daneke needed floor pads to help prevent an accident. Neither Daneke nor his assistant had to worry about finding them, however, because Dr. Nelson purchased them himself and brought them to Daneke's assisted living facility. Their relationship is, by all counts, a pointed testament to the fact that concierge medicine enables doctors to attend to those little details that are, in fact, not so little at all.

In the end, Dr. Taylor feels that practicing concierge medicine allows him to remember what an honor and privilege it is to be a doctor. "I am going to spend the last part of my career as I've always dreamed," he says. "There is no reason why a doctor should be prevented from treating patients the way my own father did. I want this generation and the next to feel as excited about entering the medical profession as he did, and I want our kids to experience the same kind of care that both he and members of previous generations were able to provide." •

**Marlene Stang**

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