

# Timing is Everything ... Is it Time for Concierge?



By Doug Graham

**T**he concept of charging patients a monthly fee even though they are probably paying for some form of health insurance seems absurd, but such is the concept of concierge medicine. Doctors—even in Tennessee—are doing it and patients are paying for it.

Once thought to be an insignificant “niche” in healthcare delivery, this practice model is getting more attention. A November 2006 *Tennessee Medicine* article on concierge medicine stated there were only a few hundred of these practices in the country. Today, according to the American Academy of Private Physicians (AAPP), that number is well over 1,000. Charles Marable, MD, of Franklin, TN, was highlighted in that article as having the first practice of this kind in the state; today his practice is alive and well and his only regret is not doing it sooner.

“I can’t imagine practicing in today’s managed care environment; that system gets in the way of quality patient care,” said Dr. Marable. “This decision has allowed me to focus more time on my patients, caring for them as I was trained to, without sacrificing my personal health and family.”

“Choosing personalized, direct care came after a collection of defining moments,” said Marcy Zwelling-Aamot, MD, president of the AAPP Board of Directors, in an article on *News-Medical.net*. “I grew tired of the interference in regards to therapies I was recommending for my patients and of hearing patients describe scenarios where they were paying more for needed medicines because these were placed in a ‘specialty tier category.’ These are everyday scenarios that put patients at risk.”

A driving factor in the growth of concierge medicine is decreased reimbursement, increasing the need to see more pa-

tients. To compensate, doctors must either spend less time seeing each patient or devote more of their day to patient visits—by coming in early, staying later or shortening the lunch break. This cycle continues to compound, leading to frustration and a decision to ultimately alter the practice model.

A concierge practice is advantageous for a physician and any patient who chooses to be a part of one. The ability to spend more time with patients, control your schedule and have a similar standard of living is enticing for a physician; the luxury of same-day appointments, spending more time with their doctor and having it covered by health insurance (in many cases) are just a few of the benefits for the patient. The reality is not every physician can convert to a concierge practice and not every patient will enroll in one.

## THE ROADMAP

The roadmap to converting to a concierge practice will vary depending on a physician’s situation. Consider:

- *why* you want to do it. If your reason is to simply rebel against a system you can no longer tolerate, that is probably not the best motive.
- whether you want to create and run your own practice or be a part of a “franchise.” Some companies can charge as much as \$500 per patient (nearly one-third of the retainer) to convert and manage the practice. While this provides a level of comfort for some physicians, others prefer to create and run the practice themselves.

If your decision is yes, here are some steps to making the transition:

- Develop a fee schedule. How much

should I charge for the retainer? How much for a visit?

- Make a timetable. How long is it going to take to ultimately open the practice?
- Identify a good healthcare attorney, someone familiar with the requirements for structuring retainer-style practices.
- Create a marketing strategy and supporting marketing materials.
- Decide whether you will participate with insurance companies.
- Notify your patients. Realize that most will not be a part of the new practice and therefore will need time (with your help) to find a new physician.
- Schedule follow-up meetings with your patients to answer questions and consider any suggestions from those who decide to join the new practice.
- Hire a consultant. Running a practice while trying to convert to another can be time consuming and arduous.

Converting to or starting a concierge medicine practice is a big decision with many considerations. If you desire more flexibility, more time with your patients, more control over your relationship with payers and the day-to-day operations of your practice, then concierge medicine may be right for you. +

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