

Primary care: an integral health relationship

The relationship between an individual and his or her primary care physician is critically important in controlling healthcare spending and successfully leading individuals to health. A 2008 *Health Affairs*¹ article showed that persons who enter the health-care system through a primary care physician spend about one-third less annually for their care. For the patient, it is more than just showing up for treatment of a sinus infection in a quick visit – it is about the physician partner having a clear vision of the entire health of an individual and the health influences in an individual’s environment.

Primary care physicians are a category of healthcare providers that are trained and will work with the individual to create a plan for



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his or her overall health. For some, that means monitoring simple risk factors, helping promote healthy behaviors, and coordinating specialists and services when specific conditions present themselves. For others, it means helping control chronic diseases or acute conditions so those diseases have the least possible effect on long-term health.

Primary care doctors can be internists, general practitioners, family medicine doctors and the physician assistants or nurse practitioners they work with. Many OB/Gyns also act as primary care doctors by taking on an additional role for the female patient. It is important that the physician and the individual(s) speak openly and honestly about their health and social situation. The most important thing for a person to do is to find a provider with whom he or she can be totally open and honest and who will ultimately become a true partner in his or her care.

A physician partner is also important in developing self-management support. Self-management support, as described by the Institute for Healthcare Improvement,² is the care and encouragement provided to help individuals understand their central role in managing or preventing their illness, making informed decisions about their care, and engaging in healthy behaviors. Individuals need to depend on and trust their physician(s) to help them track their medical needs and create a plan of care. A physician partner

should also help an individual create some direction for his or her personal behavioral health goals. It is believed that 80 percent of chronic diseases are based on behavior and thus preventable. Therefore, goal setting for personal behavioral change and planning wellness screenings are critical to keep individuals healthy.

Since early detection of disease has been shown to decrease medical costs and improve outcomes, wellness physicals are considered a good investment for employers to include in their benefit design. Helping individuals improve their health or reduce risk factors not only improves quality of life, but also improves health spend. A pre-diabetic who converts to diabetes costs approximately \$10,000 more per year in medical spend, but an uncontrolled diabetic costs an additional \$13,000 more per year. Uncontrolled cholesterol levels and blood pressure can lead to coronary artery disease and then heart attack. The average cost of a less severe heart attack is estimated at \$760,000, as noted in an article from CBS News.³ Beyond medical expenses, it is easy to realize that these individuals could be less effective at work when they are not feeling well. Therefore, controlling diseases affects employers, individuals and the entire country’s total healthcare spend.

Preparation is key

So, how does someone make sure the time invested in going to the doctor is effective and valuable? If you haven’t been to your doctor in a while or realize you have a long list of health issues, it is critical to let the staff know that when scheduling your appointment. An individual cannot expect to squeeze several years of questions into a single, quick doctor visit. Relationships take time to

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nurture and require frequent communication. If you are seeing someone infrequently, set up your appointment time to meet your needs. There are some tips on how to best prepare for an MD visit at <http://www.ahni.com/employee-health/be-prepared-for-your-md-visit>.

A strong primary care relationship is widely considered to be one of the most important ways to improve the health and healthcare spend in the United States. It is clear that creating a relationship takes a commitment from both parties. Individuals need to find a trusted partner in their healthcare with whom they can be open and honest. A primary care physician needs to help guide the individual in his or her path toward improved or maintained health. 🍷

1. Franks & Fiscelle, *Journal of Family Practice* 47 (1998); Sepulveda, Bodenheimer, Grundy, *Health Affairs*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (2008).
2. The Partnership for Clear Communication's "Ask Me 3" materials, <http://www.ihl.org/knowledge/Pages/OtherWebsites/AskMe3.aspx>.
3. Vernon, Steve, "How Much Would a Heart Attack Cost You?" 23 Apr. 2010, *CBSNews.com*.

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a stray she found on the streets of Kharkiv. "It makes things interesting," she quipped.

Electrical power is an off-and-on thing. There isn't a good pizza to be had anywhere in Kharkiv, but there are some reminders of home. American vampire television shows dominate local entertainment among young people.

The Internet allows Connie to stay in contact with friends in the United States. Sometimes, though, the Internet is not enough.

This past winter, Connie's brother died unexpectedly just before Christmas. At those times, distances must seem so much greater than on a map. And in the aloneness of a solitary assignment 10,000 miles from home and family, grief is like a stone.

But even with all the sacrifices, Connie calls serving in the Peace Corps "the great adventure of my life."

Connie's service in Ukraine ends in December. Her dog is coming with her, joining the two she left behind while overseas. She hasn't thought much about what she will do when she returns other than hug her family and friends, find the best pizza in northern Indiana, and stretch out on the biggest bed she can find.

The next time you hear someone say there aren't any heroes anymore, let them know that ain't true. There *are* heroes. Some of them are even lawyers. Connie Postelli is mine. 🍷

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