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Doctor establishes South Jersey's first concierge practice

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When Dr. Frank P. Pettinelli joined his father's primary-care practice more than two decades ago, he never envisioned how the delivery of family medicine would soon change.

He grew up seeing a family practice run "the old way," where doctors had a lot of autonomy and a lot of time to spend with their patients.

Flash forward to 2007.

"It's really tough out there in family care," Pettinelli said. "Everybody has been hit pretty hard by managed care. It's a pretty grueling lifestyle. I found myself working 16-, 18-hour days. I'd be here until 11 o'clock at night doing paperwork. It's really a system that needs to be fixed."

Pettinelli decided to take matters into his own hands and become one of the small, but growing, number of family practitioners in the region to open a concierge medicine practice.

The concierge medicine model involves patients paying an annual retainer fee, typically about \$2,000, in return for 24/7 access to their physician. Other amenities include same day/walk-in appointments, house calls, personal condition-specific education and extended physicals.

The controversial model has drawn criticism from those who say it creates a two-tiered system in which those with the financial resources get better medical attention.

Doctors who have embraced the model argue it is the only way they know to practice medicine the way they believe it should be practiced.

Pettinelli, whose practice is in Mount Laurel, N.J., made the switch by entering into a partnership with **Total Access Medical**.

The Bala Cynwyd-based concierge medical management company has already established six concierge practice sites locally. The partnership with Pettinelli is the company's first in South Jersey.

Founded in 2002, Total Access manages two concierge medicine practices in Bala Cynwyd along with two in Upper Dublin, one in West Chester and one in Wilmington.

The company's first practice, led by Dr. Robert Weiss in Bala Cynwyd, is the largest, having signed up about 550 patients. The others have between 150 and 275 patients. Dr. Daphne Goldberg in Bala Cynwyd, one of the newest doctors to link with Total Access, is the company's first primary-care physician who also practices obstetrics and pediatrics.

The company's only failed practice was one step up in the Norristown area where, eventually, it concluded the

demographics couldn't support the retainer model.

Total Access isn't finished expanding.

"We are looking to add as many as 15 more retainer practices in the region," said Richard Stamps, president of Total Access.

Another concierge practice management company, MDVIP based in Boca Raton, Fla., operates three practice sites in the Philadelphia suburbs along with one in Princeton and another in North Jersey.

In addition, a handful of physicians, such as Dr. Charles C. Whitney at Revolution Health Services in Washington Crossing, have formed their own independent concierge practices.

Pettinelli long resisted selling out to area health systems that have sought to build market share by buying primary-care practices and employing their physicians. He didn't want to give up his independence.

"I talk with other docs and what you come to realize is when you sell your practice you're trading off one set of problems for another set of problems," he said. "You may get a certain amount of financial security, but you are also under the gun to produce. There are quotas you have to meet and things like that. It's all about trade-offs."

For Pettinelli, the hardest part about making the switch was informing his 5,000 patients about the change.

In his first few weeks, about 300 people -- some previous patients, some new ones -- have signed on with the new model.

"I've been telling my patients this is how it was when I first started out and wasn't real busy," Pettinelli said. "I can spend more time and visit them in the hospitals. I'm not in such a rush."

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