



'Boutique medicine' comes to Delaware

Imagine a doctor's office without a waiting room or a physician who makes house calls -- and knows his patients by their faces rather than the names on their charts.

That's the strategy of Total Access Medical, a regional provider of boutique health care in which patients pay an annual, \$2,000 fee in order to receive more personalized care.

Also known as concierge medicine or retainer-based medicine, the concept is a new-fangled twist on the old-fashioned notion of the family doctor. With offices in Pennsylvania and Delaware, Total Access is rapidly gaining a healthy clientele, said Richard Stamps, president.

"Business is great, mostly because our existing patients are so excited about the care they receive so they tell other people about it," he said.

In 2004, Total Access grew 250 percent, from 300 to 800 subscribers with a retention rate of 98 percent, Stamps said. He attributed part of that spike to the introduction of a zero-interest finance plan that allows patients to pay their fee on a monthly or quarterly basis.

"We do have a number of wealthy people in the practice," he said. "But, surprisingly, there's a broad spectrum of people ranging from teachers to retired SEPTA workers."

The first doctor on board was Robert Weiss, an internist who used to see 40 or more patients a day in his practice in Bala Cynwyd, PA. Today, as a Total Access provider, he examines seven or eight people, who have all received same-day or next-day appointments.

Instead of cooling their heels in a waiting room, patients are whisked into an examination room when they arrive at the office. Instead of the 3,000 patients typically affiliated with a doctor's office, each physician in the Total Access practice has a maximum of 600 patients.

In addition to Weiss, the doctors on staff are Winslow Murdoch, a board-certified family practitioner in West Chester, and Bruce Sokoloff, board certified in both internal medicine and forensics and practicing in Wilmington.

Physicians say they like boutique medicine because it enables them to spend more time with patients and focus on wellness and preventative care.

Total Access patients also receive a series of educational materials on living a healthier lifestyle. Physicians can counsel patients on nutrition, exercise and living with specific ailments. Monthly in-office training is available on fitness, healthy eating and stress management.

From 7:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday, patients have full access to physicians. After hours, patients can contact their doctors by email, beeper or cell phone. Medical records can be emailed via a secure Web site to any hospital in the world. Doctors also will meet patients at an area hospital in the event of an emergency in order to coordinate care with specialists.

"Our doctors might even accompany their patients on specialty visits," Stamps said.

An executive plan is also available for businesses. When five or more people in the company enroll, a dedicated primary care physician can set up in-office hours at the patient's convenience.

Total Access will open a fourth office this year, at a site to be determined on Philadelphia's Main Line. Stamps expects the business will continue to grow at a steady, manageable pace.

It's a far cry from the beginning of the movement five years ago, when boutique medicine might have been called "wealth care" instead of health care. A pioneer practice in Portland, Oregon, charged its patients \$13,000 up front to enroll.

That limited patients to an elite group. But today most boutique practices charge fees ranging from \$1,500-\$2,500, which physicians compare to the cost of a membership at a fitness club.

The largest such practice is MDVIP, which started in Boca Raton, Fla., with a single physician in 2000 and now encompasses doctors in 17 states, including Pennsylvania and New Jersey. The University of Pennsylvania opened a boutique medical office in Bucks County.

By the numbers, deluxe doctors also are thriving. The average physician in a concierge practice earns \$400,000 a year compared to \$153,000 a year for the typical general practitioner, according to Medical Economics magazine.

The Total Access physicians said the biggest benefit to boutique medicine is being able to spend more quality time with patients.

Says Weiss, "It has helped me to lead a normal life again doing what I love."