

on-call care

by Andrea Stein

Doctors frustrated with exorbitant overhead costs and robber-baron malpractice rates find solace in medical-management companies.

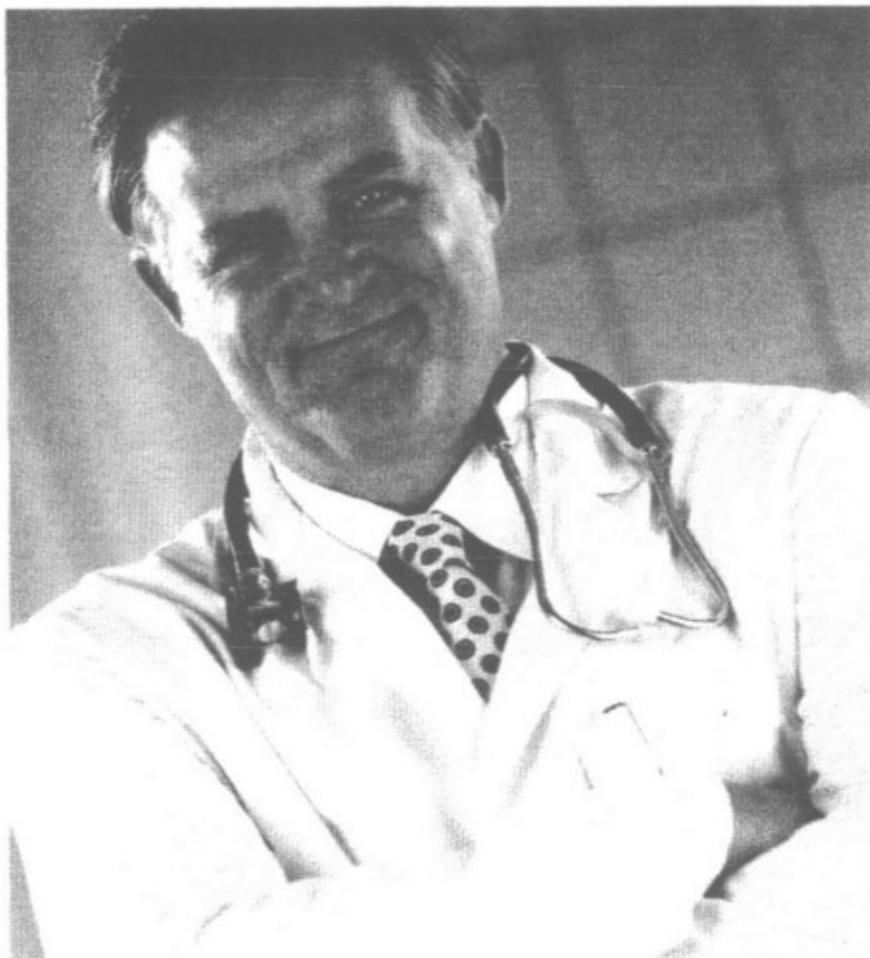
Boutique or concierge medicine offers patients shorter waiting times, longer exams and off-hours access to doctors. Doctors who have switched to this program of care benefit with more flexibility and fewer patients.

Total Access Medical, established in November 2002, is one of the area's leading concierge medical-management companies, says Bennett Andelman, director of marketing and operations. Each affiliated physician reduces her practice size and agrees to provide round-the-clock access to patients and same-day or next-day appointments. A doctor in one of these boutique practices tends to have a maximum of 600 patients rather than the thousands that many physicians have.

Andelman says physicians who have turned to concierge medicine have done so because of reimbursement battles with insurance companies. Not only have insurance companies (and Medicare) reduced the amounts that doctors are reimbursed, but they often establish complicated paperwork protocols that delay payment. At the same time, medical-malpractice insurance rates have doubled or tripled for many doctors.

Dr. Bruce Sokoloff, a Wilmington internist, partnered with Total Access Medical in August 2004. He agrees that insurance issues are one of the biggest reasons doctors switch to concierge medicine. Sokoloff, like many other doctors, is frustrated over increased overhead expenses and rising malpractice-insurance rates.

"[Doctors] really want to do a good job, but the economics don't let them," he says. Insurance companies have reduced their reimbursements to physicians significantly in the past



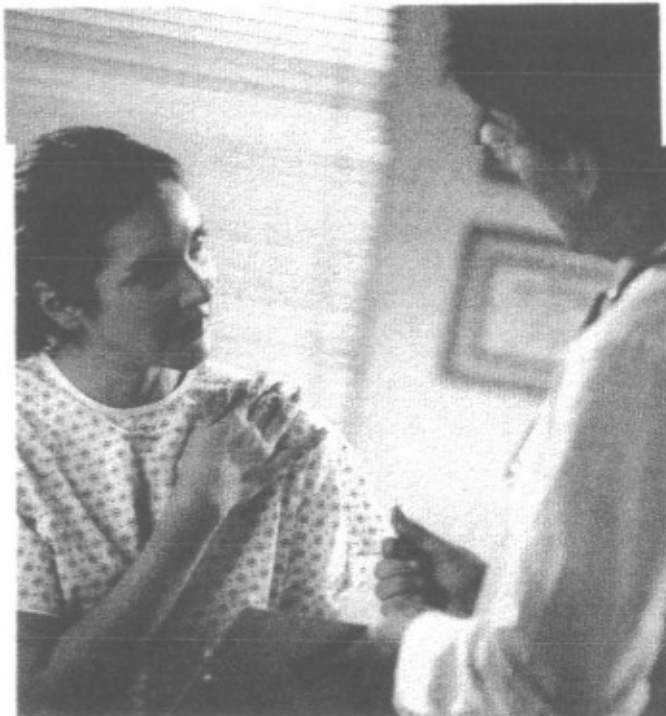
four or five years, Andelman says, and doctors have been forced to increase the number of patients they treat to compensate for the income reduction. As patient volume increases, doctors must reduce their examination time, which in turn can lead to a faulty diagnosis. Andelman believes the trend toward concierge medicine "provides physicians with not a solution, but an alternative." Concierge medicine allows doc-

tors to practice in an atmosphere that is patient-focused. Physicians allow 30 to 45 minutes per exam, which allows for proper diagnosis and a thorough look at the patient's medical history.

Patients pay a yearly \$2,000 fee directly to Total Access Medical for access to one of its physicians, but use their private insurance to cover outside expenses such as hospital stays, specialized care and prescription drugs.

Andelman says some critics say the fee makes concierge medicine affordable only to an elite group, but he believes the optional service is valuable. He and Sokoloff say many patients turn to concierge medicine as a way of making health care their first priority. "It's for people [who] put healthcare above other things," Sokoloff says. He says that this trend does not meet the needs of all doctors or patients, and he does not believe this trend will jeopardize the health-care system or the medical community.

"I can spend time with people — that



has to be the biggest benefit," Sokoloff says. Because he can spend more time with patients and be more involved with their lives, Sokoloff has been able to control medical problems, such as diabetes

and heart disease, by making sure the patients get proper testing and teaching proactive prevention.

Before turning to concierge medicine, Sokoloff treated about 2,700 patients and worked almost 100 hours per week. He could not keep up with this schedule and be happy, he says.

"The biggest thing was not only did I feel like I couldn't provide the care, but it was getting harder to do," Sokoloff says. "This allows me to practice the way I want to practice."

According to Andelman, concierge medicine allows physicians and patients to deal on a much more personal level where patients can truly appreciate the dedication and passion of their physician. "Patients [who] join generally never go back to a normal practice." HF

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