



Hands-On Medicine ... minus the hand-off to bureaucracy

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It was happening too often. Shelley Picker of Bala Cynwyd would find a physician, then he or she would close down a practice, move or just be inaccessible. So about a year ago, Picker decided to join her husband as a patient of Dr. Robert Weiss, who had become associated with Total Access Medical, a new concept in an increasingly complex and often frustrating medical world.

Weiss was weary himself of what he calls the “supermarket mentality of high volume” in primary care, and had decided to affiliate with Total Access Medical as a means to limit his practice, but also to offer absolute and total access to his patients.

Sometimes known as “boutique medicine,” this approach is designed to benefit both frustrated patients who do battle with what many perceive as a chaotic medical world, and the physician who is weary of high-volume practice and draining paper-work.

For the privilege of complete access, and the guarantee of meticulous and timely care, Total Access Medical patient subscribers pay an annual fee of \$2,000, and are advised to keep their health insurance.

Auspicious timing

For Shelley Picker, the timing was unbelievably auspicious.

Just a short time after she signed up with Weiss, she was having severe back pain.

“Right after our son’s wedding ... I got a diagnosis of metastasized breast cancer,” said Picker, a former public-relations practitioner and busy artist.

Instead of having to wait days or weeks for important tests and referrals to specialists, Picker was spared all of that because Total Access Medical handles those details for its members. No gatekeepers. No frustrating waits for vital diagnostic tests.

“Dr. Weiss lined up tests for me within a day, was available to me at any time, and saw to it that I got superb care. He became not just my caring doctor, but my medical advocate at a time when I truly needed one.”

Weiss, in practice since 1968, is board-certified in internal medicine, and is an assistant clinical professor at Presbyterian Hospital.

‘A real crisis’

What is happening to the American health system is well-documented. One study, a survey by the Lincoln Institute of Public Opinion Research in Harrisburg, revealed that 70 percent of doctors surveyed believed that their current quality of care for their patients was seriously jeopardized because of their difficulties in obtaining specialized care for them.

The same study revealed that nearly half of these doctors had difficulty in the past year obtaining medical malpractice insurance; some 70 percent had considered closing their practices due to the cost of that insurance.

“We know we’ve come to a real crisis in medicine,” said Bennett Andelman, director of marketing for Total Access Medicine, “and our concept is definitely filling a need for those who want a superior level of care. Instead of seeing the usual 2,000 patients, our doctors voluntarily limit themselves to no more than 600, in order to provide them with immediate access and the time they need.”

According to Andelman, the concept, which began just last year as the first area boutique practice in Bala Cynwyd, is already showing its strength.

Andelman reports that Total Access Medical has already added two additional practices to the company, with the newest in the West Chester area.

In the future, more doctors may look to this system of care. According to Andelman, one of the chief complaints of practitioners today is that they can’t practice medicine as they wish.

Weiss was a case in point: “I ultimately closed my former practice because the patients I cared for made it clear they wanted a different model. The rapid visits, the overworked staff, the feeling that these people were being treated as commodities — not as patients — all drove me to make a very difficult decision.”

Today, he is feeling reborn: “I’ve rediscovered my profession. I’m practicing the way I did 30 years ago, giving patients the time and attention they deserve.”

While the initial subscribers to the concept tended to skew older, notes Andelman, recent ones have been across the board. “We’re seeing prevention-minded 30- and 40-year-olds opting for this system because they recognize that for \$165 a month, they can have quality care, peace of mind and the knowledge that whenever they need their doctor, he’ll be there.”

Subscriber Bennett Picker, a Philadelphia attorney, sums up what he sees as the bottom line of boutique medicine: “This is not for everyone because of economics, but I can say that this is the best money we’ve ever spent. You can’t put a value on what your health is worth because, as we know, it’s priceless.”