

Kinder, gentler medicine

Doctors deliver new-fangled care in an old-fashioned way

By **BETH FRANCIS,**
April 20, 2004

Two Naples family-practice physicians are on the cutting edge of a new trend in medicine — one that allows them to practice medicine the old-fashioned way, with more time for patients and freed from the shackles of insurance constraints.

Doctors Michael Gallops and Robert Korolevich last month opened a "concierge" or "boutique" medical practice. Gallops said he prefers the term "retainer" practice because it is more descriptive of how the practice works.

No matter what you call it, the basic deal is that patients pay an annual fee or retainer for their medical care. In return, they are guaranteed 24/7 access to their doctor. If they call the doctor after hours, the phone rings right through to his cell phone. Patient visits are scheduled for an hour to give the doctors plenty of time to thoroughly address patient needs. Patients don't face long waits in the waiting room to get in to see the doctor. They get same-day appointments when needed and more personal care. If there's an after-hours or weekend call and the patient needs to see the doctor right away, they meet at the office right away and then head to the hospital if necessary.

To guarantee there is time to see patients, both doctors are limiting the number of patients they will take to 300 each.

What it all boils down to, the doctors said, is practicing medicine in a kinder, gentler atmosphere without the frenetic pace and paperwork quagmires. They'll no longer have to deal with insurance regulations and filing for reimbursement. They no longer need an answering service. They hope to create more of a family atmosphere, where they and other staff really get to know patients.



Michel Fortier/Staff

Dr. Robert Korolevich, right, takes time to talk with patient Richard Fall during an visit on Thursday. With only 300 total patients, doctors at the practice take an hour for each appointment with no wait time for the patient.



Michel Fortier/Staff

Naples resident Irma Hill, right, followed her physician, Michael Gallops from their old practice to the new, opting for longer doctor's visits and 24-hour care for the up-front fee.



Michel Fortier/Staff

Family practice doctors Michael Gallops, left and Robert Korolevich, right, gave up their old practices and patients to practice what they consider to be better medicine and patient care. They now each have about 300 patients, who pay an annual fee for longer face-to-face time and the ability to reach the doctors personally 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Previously, both doctors worked for Anchor Healthcare Centers — Gallops for 12 years and Korolevich for eight years. Gallops juggled as many as 8,000 patients and Korolevich almost 7,000. They had to hurry through appointments and they still found themselves falling behind schedule, with patients waiting in the waiting rooms for longer than anyone was happy with.

"I think my patients could see it in me that I just didn't have time to address all their needs," Korolevich said. "They'd bring in this long list and I just didn't have time to go through everything on the list. Then I'd walk out of the examining room and have 10 or 15 charts with all the bureaucracy and paperwork. Dealing with all the managed care issues really takes the fun out of practicing medicine."

"Boutique" or "concierge" practices are popping up all over the country as physician incomes are squeezed from all directions in the traditional setting. Medicare and insurance companies are decreasing the amount they reimburse. Physicians also are facing increased practice costs such as malpractice premiums, costlier medical supplies and rising overhead.

"Administrative burdens, delayed payments — and that's a big one — and claims processing hassles from managed care have put even further pressure on physician's incomes," Korolevich said. "As a result, many doctors typically feel compelled to treat greater numbers of patients, and many feel they don't have enough time with their patients. No one is happy about it. Not doctors. Not patients."

"If you don't see lots of patients, you run the risk of bankruptcy," Gallops said.

Gallops said it was hard to leave Anchor and his patients there, but he's looking forward to this new venture. Anchor hired two new doctors to replace the two, so patients weren't left in the lurch.

Even though the new practice has been established only a couple of weeks, both doctors said they feel confident about how things will go, and they are happier with the way they are able to practice medicine.

To gain access to this specialized type of care isn't cheap, though. The cost for a single adult is \$2,500. The cost for a couple is \$4,500 and cost for children is \$500 per year. However, no family will have to pay more than \$5,000 a year, no matter how many family members there are.

For legal reasons, a small fee is charged for office visits. Patients receive a form they can file with their own insurance companies so they will be directly reimbursed for at least a portion of the visit since the doctors would be considered "out of network." Most managed care plans reimburse for care from physicians who aren't in the network at a lower rate.

Naples resident Tom Keesling said he is sold on this new-fangled, yet old-fashioned sort of care.

"I guess the big attraction for me is the 24/7 access to care. You just pick up the phone and you get right through to either Dr. Korolevich or his partner," Keesling said.

In fact, Keesling, 71, said he already put the 24/7 promise to the test. Two weeks ago, his wife, Ruth woke up in the middle of the night with pain all over her body. At about 5 a.m. Keesling called and Korolevich picked up. Korolevich agreed to meet the Keeslings at his office. From there, he immediately admitted Ruth Keesling to Naples Community Hospital, and he coordinated the care she would need with the appropriate specialists.

"He called ahead and got us right up to the room, and by 2 o'clock that afternoon, he had lined up a gastroenterologist to perform her endoscopy," Keesling said. "We couldn't have asked for better service, and he coordinated the whole thing. That's why I'm so keen on this whole thing. I've seen it work."

There are critics who say "concierge" or "boutique" practices create a two-tiered level of care because not everyone can afford it.

But Dr. Jeanine Carlson, an internal medicine doctor at the New England Medical Center at Tufts University School of Medicine in Boston, defended the concept.

If it makes patients and doctors happy, why not? she said.

"We are the first academic medical center in the country to do it, but I think you'll see more of it," she said. "Before we started this in December, I had gotten to the point where I had only 10 minutes to spend with patients, and that's just not enough time."

She said the "concierge" approach allows her to do more for her patients.

"Patients are paying for convenience and more thorough service," she said. "It's a different level of service, and it's one I'm happy to be able to provide."

