

Doctors enjoying unique practice

Open houses intended to draw 'benefactors' and uninsured patients

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Last Updated: June 5, 2004, 07:55:15 AM PDT

For Modesto doctor R.J. Heck, a day at the office sometimes can mean a day out of the office.

Heck and fellow physician Robert Forester recently founded a unique medical practice that includes making house calls.

On Thursday, with his red doctor bag in hand, Heck visited Modesto resident Delouries Bertolotti for a checkup.

"There aren't too many doctors around that come to the house," said Bertolotti, 71, of Modesto. "That's what makes you feel better immediately -- when someone will come down and sit like a friend and talk to you, and is really interested in what you have to say. ... That's part of the cure."

Bertolotti, a home-bound diabetic, is one of about 340 "benefactors" who belong to St. Luke's Family Practice.

The practice -- named for biblical apostle St. Luke, the patron saint of physicians -- provides 24-hour access and free home and office visits to benefactors, for a yearly sum. In turn, Heck and Forester are able to provide uninsured patients free care at their office.

It's a new concept -- one that not everyone grasps right away. But it is working, the doctors said.

St. Luke's Family Practice will hold open-house events this month to introduce the practice to the community. Doctors will talk with visitors at the June 15 and 22 events, which include refreshments, a tour, an explanation of the practice and its benefits, a demonstration of online appointments and an opportunity to sign up as a patient.

The doctors have just under 60 percent of the 600 benefactors they need to fulfill their plans for the practice.

"We really need more people who are willing to support this ministry, and in exchange get the kind of unparalleled care you just can't get in the regular medical community right now," Heck, 39, said.

St. Luke's also seeks more uninsured patients, or "recipients." The practice can accommodate up to 120 uninsured visits a month.

"We need more people to come in and use our services for free," Forester, 44, of Modesto said. "Anyone can come in for the first visit. If it is something acute, we will see them right then, no questions asked."

The doctors began seeing benefactor patients in January and opened the practice to uninsured patients in April. Five months after starting, the unconventional practice is doing well, they said.

"We've been very contented with the ability to spend more time with each patient, and they are very content with the idea of being able to get ahold of us any time they need us, and for our ability to respond rapidly to their problem," Heck said of benefactors, who can telephone or e-mail the doctors around the clock.

Uninsured recipients "are universally thankful for having access to care at all," Heck said. "We've seen people who haven't had care in many years who have finally gotten care."

Three-in-one St. Luke's Family Practice combines three models of health care: high-tech/high-touch, in which a doctor computerizes the practice, has less staff and spends more time with patients; boutique care, when people prepay for their family-practice care for a year and get more personalized attention; and a nonprofit foundation that provides beneficent care to the uninsured.

It's a concept that has caught the eye of medical professionals in the area and beyond.

George Delgado, a family-practice physician in Benicia and associate clinical professor at the University of California at Davis, has been watching the new practice with interest.

Delgado had heard of boutique practices; he admired their personalized care, but worried such small practices might leave some patients out in the cold.

"When I heard about their model, (where) in addition to the kind of boutique practice, they were also going to provide care for people who had no other kinds of care, no insurance and didn't qualify for state aid, it seemed like a really nice way to balance this and to really be a service to the community, at the same time practicing medicine the way you felt it should be practiced," Delgado said.

Win-win proposition

He believes the idea will catch on because it serves patients and also gets physicians out of the "rat race" of HMOs and medical groups.

Delgado, who is Catholic, appreciates that Heck and Forester base the practice on their Catholic beliefs and the biblical admonition to "use (one's gifts) to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace."

He thinks "the pendulum in medicine has swung too far toward secularization. Patients actually want doctors to ask them about their own faith beliefs and, when appropriate, to incorporate that into their care."

Forester and Heck treat patients of all -- or no -- faiths, and are open about their own.

"A couple of people who came in, I was able to pray with them, at their request," Heck said. "This is not generally something I suggest, but when they ask about it, I say, 'I would be willing to pray with you.'"

The practice also has had the unintended benefit of connecting patients who are eligible for government insurance with the appropriate agencies, and has received referrals from community agencies such as Child Protective Services, Children's Crisis Center, Bethany Pregnancy Center, school and public health nurses and churches.

The doctors have examined a woman who had a breast mass that was undiagnosed for 15 months because she lacked insurance and didn't seek medical care, Forester said. They obtained medications for a man with chronic health problems related to diabetes who was referred by Adult Protective Services.

About 10 residents of Modesto's Redwood Family Center -- a facility for women recovering from alcohol and drug addiction -- have been treated at St. Luke's since it opened. The facility, run by Inter-Faith Ministries, houses about 30 women and 45 children. Most children are able to get some insurance coverage, Redwood resident director Deanna Morris said. Mothers, however, often have none.

Heck and Forester are able to treat them immediately, avoiding long waits in emergency rooms or weeks trying to get an appointment, Morris said. She feels the doctors' faith is key to the success of their mission.

"I think it makes all the difference in the world in their compassion," Morris said. "Not everybody feels good about our population -- some are pretty critical -- but they treat them like real queens."

She called the doctors "a godsend."

Heck and Forester said living out their faith, practicing medicine as they want to and experiencing greater quality of life -- for themselves, their families and their patients -- has been a joy.

"It has been incredibly rewarding and fulfilling," Forester said.

Both doctors are seeing fewer patients with the new practice, and even once up to full patient loads will make about a third less than in their previous practices as members of a medical group.

But, they said, it's worth it.

"(It's) no problem considering the satisfaction we are gaining from this model," Heck said. "I wouldn't go back."

Free open houses will be held from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. June 15 and 22 at St. Luke's Family Practice, 1400 Florida Ave., Suite 109, Modesto. Office hours are weekdays (except Wednesdays), 8:30 a.m. to noon and 1:30 to 4:30 p.m. Benefactors can receive care on Wednesdays, weekends, evenings and holidays by special arrangement. For information, call 549-1057 or visit www.stlukesfp.org.

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