

Primary Care

Developing an Integral Health Relationship

By Mary Delaney



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The relationship between an individual and his or her primary care physician is critically important to controlling health care spending and successfully leading individuals to health. A 2008 *Health Affairs* article showed that persons who enter the health care system through a primary care physician spend about one-third less annually for their care. For the patient, it is more than just showing up for treatment of a sinus infection in a quick visit – it is about the physician partner having a clear vision of the entire health (and health influences) in an individual’s environment.

Primary care physicians are a category of health care providers that are trained and will work with the individual to create a plan for his or her overall health. For some, that means monitoring simple risk factors, helping promote healthy behaviors, and coordinating specialists and services when specific conditions present themselves. For others, it means helping control chronic diseases or acute conditions so those afflictions have the least possible effect on long-term health.

Helping an individual improve his or her health or risk factors not only improves quality of life, but also reduces the health care spend. A pre-diabetic who evolves to diabetes costs approximately \$10,000 more per year in medical spend, but an uncontrolled diabetic costs an additional \$13,000 more per year.

Primary care doctors can be internists, general practitioners, family medicine doctors and the physician assistants or nurse practitioners they work with. Many OB/GYNs also act as primary care doctors by taking on an additional role for the female patient. It is important that the physician and the individual speak openly and honestly about the patient’s health and social situation. The most important thing for a person to do is to find a trusted provider, one who will ultimately become a true care partner.

Supporting efforts

A physician partner is also important in developing self-management support. As described by the Institute for Healthcare Improvement, self-management support is the care and encouragement provided to help individuals understand their central role in managing or preventing their illness, make informed decisions about care and engage in healthy behaviors. The individual needs to depend on, and trust, their physician to help them track their medical needs and create a plan of care. A physician partner should also help an individual create some direction for their personal behavioral health goals. It is

believed that 80% of chronic diseases are preventable, based on behavior. Therefore, goal setting for personal behavioral change and planning wellness screenings are critical to helping keep individuals healthy.

Since early detection of disease has been shown to decrease medical costs and improve outcomes, wellness physicals are considered a good investment for employers to include in their benefit design. Helping an individual improve his or her health or risk factors not only improves quality of life, but also reduces the health care spend. A pre-diabetic who evolves to diabetes costs approximately \$10,000 more per year in medical spend, but an uncontrolled diabetic costs an additional \$13,000 more per year. Uncontrolled cholesterol levels and blood pressure can lead to coronary artery disease and then heart attack. The average cost of a less severe heart attack is estimated at \$760,000, as noted in an article from *CBS News*. Beyond medical expenses, it is easy to realize that these individuals could be less effective at work when they are not feeling well. Therefore, controlling diseases affects employers, individuals and the entire country’s total health care spend.

Preparation is key

So, how does someone make sure the time they invest in going to the doctor is effective and valuable to them? If you haven’t been to your doctor in some time or realize you have a long list of health issues, it is critical to let the staff know that when you schedule your appointment. An individual cannot expect to squeeze several years of questions into a single, quick doctor visit. Relationships take time to nurture and require frequent communication. If you are seeing someone infrequently, set up your appointment time to meet your needs. There are some tips on how to best prepare for a doctor visit at www.ahni.com/employee-health/be-prepared-for-your-md-visit.

A strong primary care relationship is widely considered to be one of the most important ways to improve the health and health care spend in the United States. It is clear that creating a relationship takes a commitment from both parties. An individual needs to find a health partner that they trust and can be totally open and honest with. A primary care physician needs to help guide the individual in their path toward improved or maintained health.

INFORMATION LINK

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