Concierge medicine being embraced by a growing number of primary care physicians

One expert sees the root of the trend in an environment that's still largely volume-driven.

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Why are more physicians turning to concierge medicine than ever before?

Terry Bauer, CEO of concierge medicine transition firm Specialdocs, recently attempted to answer that question in the DocPreneur podcast series, the audio component of trade publication Concierge Medicine Today. A long-time believer in the power of concierge medicine to help repair the healthcare system, Bauer sees the root of the trend in an environment that's still largely volume-driven.

"After years of shrinking reimbursements, truncated office visits and mounting regulations, physicians have been left with few satisfying choices to pursue
their calling," Bauer said in the podcast. "The sheer impossibility of being able to offer quality care in a volume-driven environment is why increasing numbers of physicians view concierge medicine as a career- and life-saving measure.

"I've witnessed firsthand how a membership practice provides a path for physicians to thrive and benefits their patients with more in-depth care," he said.

In theory, the concept of concierge medicine is a simple one. A doctor bases his or her practice on more of a "subscription" model and patients pay $1,500 to $2,000 a year to have a deeper, one-on-one relationship with their doctor. Patients still need to purchase catastrophic and pharmacological insurance, but otherwise, they have unfettered access to their physician. On the other side, the physician is allowed more time per patient and greater control over the number of patients they would like to see.

But it's not the right model for everyone, said Bauer. Before electing to work with a physician, Specialdocs conducts a thorough evaluation, considering factors such as years practicing in the community and professional reputation. Most important is the response to the question, "Why do you want to make this change?"

"If the answer is about making more money, that's a red flag for us," Bauer reveals to Tetreault. "The primary motivation voiced by our successful clients is the ability to provide the best medicine possible. The physician most likely to succeed is the one who says, 'I'm seeing 30 patients a day, what worries me most is that if I had more time, asked more questions, could I have learned something that would help me make a better diagnosis?'"

If anything, one of the biggest benefits of the concierge model to physicians is alleviating burnout. Earlier this year, a Medscape National Report on Physician Burnout and Depression found that nearly two-thirds of U.S. physicians report feeling burned-out, depressed or both, with one in three admitting that their feelings of depression have an impact on how they relate to patients and colleagues.

And while Bauer cautioned that money should not be the motivating factor behind the switch to a concierge model, physician burnout can hurt the bottom
line. Research has shown, for instance, a consistent relationship between higher levels of physician burnout and lower levels of patient safety and quality of care.

The misperception that concierge medicine is driven by physicians focused on increased revenues by treating only the super wealthy has unjustly dogged the industry for years, Bauer said.

"Concierge doctors charging fees of $20,000 a year make headlines, but it's more affordable than commonly reported," he said. "The average annual fee is $2,000 - equivalent to most people's cable bill."