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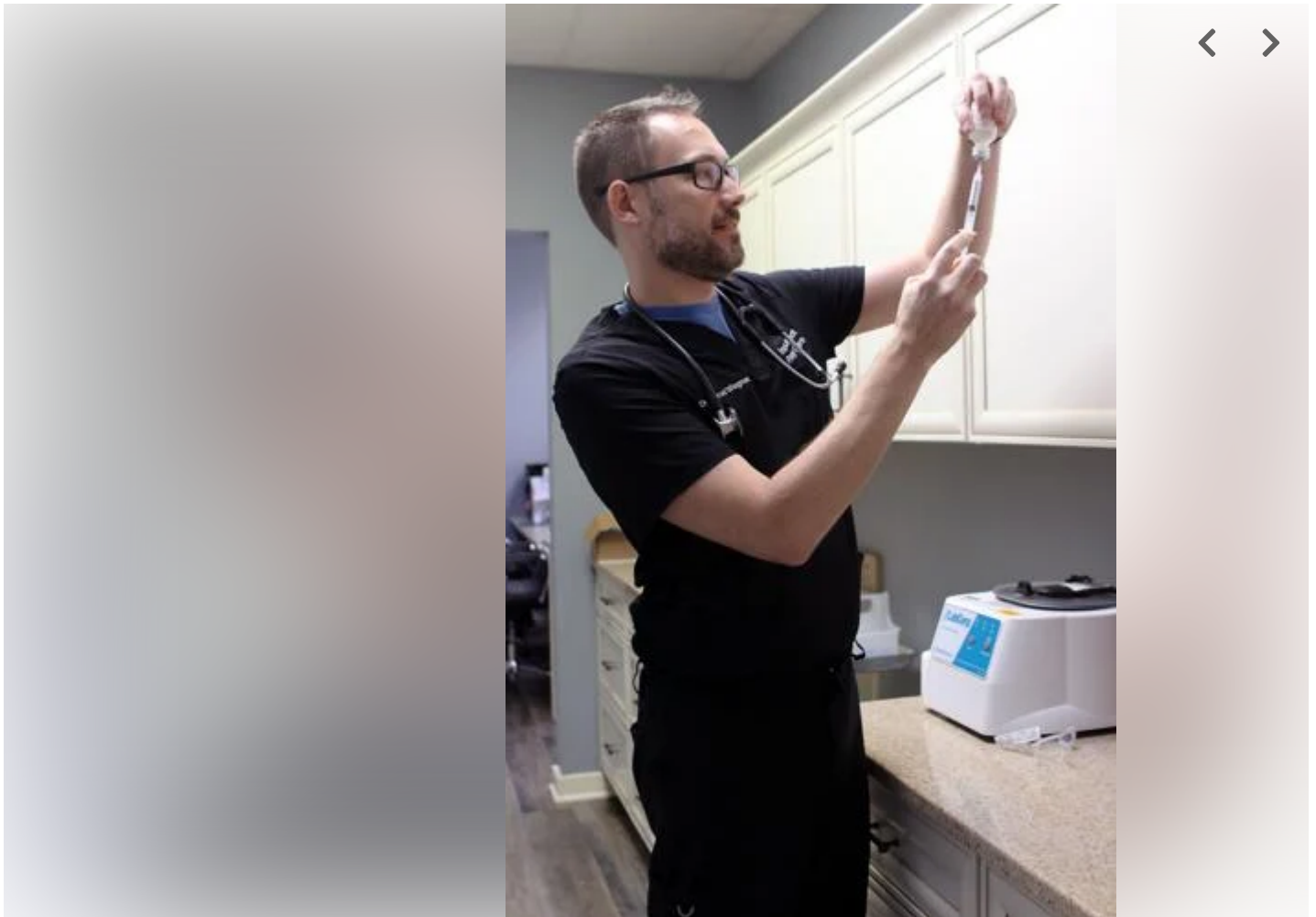
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Direct primary care becomes more popular in northeast Indiana, nationally

Maya Wilkins | The Journal Gazette

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Dr. Jarrod Weigman draws an injection for a patient at Indiana Direct Primary Care, 5714 Coventry Lane.

Mike Durbin | The Journal Gazette

Dr. Dennis Uhrhammer can spend more time with patients now that he isn't inundated with the paperwork that comes with being a physician for a hospital network.

As a doctor with Indiana University Health, Uhrhammer cared for about 3,000 patients annually. Now, he is the physician in charge of Family Direct Care Inc., and he hopes to see about 700 patients this year.

Because he has fewer patients and less paperwork, Uhrhammer can now spend more time with each client, listening to concerns.

Uhrhammer works in direct primary care, a practice and payment model where patients pay their physician directly and periodically for primary care services, according to the American Academy of Family Physicians. It is also known as a doctor subscription program.

Direct primary care typically charges a monthly, quarterly or annual flat fee that covers all services, including clinical and laboratory services, consultative services, care coordination and comprehensive care management. Services typically cost \$50 to \$150 per month.

According to Medical Economics, direct primary care memberships see an annual growth of 36%, reaching a total growth rate of 241% in 2017 to 2021. A 2021 study published in the National Library of Medicine said direct primary care is a viable alternative to the fee-for-service reimbursement model, and it has shown to be economically and financially sustainable.

In November, Amazon announced it would offer health care from One Medical, its virtual direct primary care service. Prime members can choose to pay either \$9 monthly or \$99 for the year.

A smoother process

Uhrhammer, a physician for nearly 25 years, opened his practice in October, so he's still figuring out how to build a client base and market direct primary care.

Uhrhammer said he thinks patients like the flexibility direct primary care allows. He is on-call for patients 24 hours a day, and they can schedule appointments virtually or in-person.

Appointments are typically 45 minutes, and Uhrhammer leaves 15-minute openings in his day for any medical emergencies he needs to address.

"We want the patients to have access to us all the time," he said.

The only staff members at Family Direct Care Inc. are Uhrhammer and a nurse. The doctor, who also worked with Lutheran Health Network, said he might hire a receptionist later, but the two staff members are all he needs now.

A smaller staff also allows for a smoother process for patients and a more personal relationship with their provider, he said.

“When a patient calls into an office, they don’t have access to their doctor who knows them very well,” Uhrhammer said. “It’s usually an answering pool of nurses, and then that message is moved over to the individual office, then the individual office moves it to the nurse that is directly working with the doctor, then finally to the doctor.”

Uhrhammer believes his patients are more open about their health and what they are willing to do. His practice doesn’t follow a “cookbook-type of medicine,” so they take into account what the patients want, he said.

Patient relationships

Dr. Matt Pflieger operates Cardinal Family Medicine in Huntington with his wife, Dr. Janelle Maxwell Pflieger. The couple started their practice about seven years ago when they moved to Indiana from Colorado.

At the time, few direct primary care clinics were open in the area, Pflieger said.

“We were starting in a very new field that people weren’t really used to,” Pflieger said. “It took a lot of work to talk to people about what the model is, and that from the standpoint of the patient and provider, it makes getting care a lot easier.”

Pflieger said the couple enjoy working in direct primary care because they run a smaller practice and can build relationships with patients. He said prices are also more transparent than those of large health care systems, which patients enjoy.

Cardinal Family Medicine has about 900 clients, and Pflieger said they haven’t accepted new patients for about four years. He said the couple relied on word of mouth and some marketing in the beginning.

“Then it really caught fire and filled up pretty quickly,” Pflieger said. “We haven’t had people really leave our practice because they like it and it’s easy to get care.”

The current health system model isn’t sustainable for providers, Pflieger said, because it requires providers to spend less time with a patient. In direct primary care, the pace is slower.

The couple's patients are like family to them, Pflieger said, which he thinks makes them trust Cardinal Family Medicine more.

"They know who we are," he said. "People will trust us with the decisions that we're making. We're not making it because of a lack of time, but we're having shared decisions about what we should do with their health."

Employee benefit

Carrie Miller has been a patient at Cardinal Family Medicine since 2016. Miller also owns Innovative Packaging Corp. in Huntington and includes the direct primary care service in employees' benefits.

Miller employs almost 30 workers, but she said only 16 use Cardinal Family Medicine. Her business pays \$55 per employee each month.

Miller said she likes Cardinal Family Medicine because staff is easy to talk to, and they're always available when she needs them. Miller also said she feels more comfortable talking about her health issues.

"They work with the whole family," she said. "They want to know that your spouse and children are doing good because your health and attitude trickles down to them."

The Huntington resident said she talks to her doctors about three to five times a month, which is more than she would talk to doctors in a health system.

"It's wonderful," she said. "I wish there was more of them."

Dr. Jarrod Wiegman, physician and owner of Indiana Direct Primary Care, said when he first attended medical school, he wanted to do everything.

"When I started in medicine, this is sort of how I envisioned it would be," Wiegman said. "It's about focusing on people's health and treating disease, but it's really focusing on living a healthy lifestyle."

With traditional medicine, Wiegman said, high patient volume prevents doctors from encouraging healthy lifestyles.

Wanting more

Because he wanted more from a practice than traditional medicine offered, Wiegman said, his family encouraged him to open Indiana Direct Primary Care to do what he envisioned. His goal is to focus on healthy lifestyles, and his business offers on-site perks including a gym, massage therapy, a personal trainer and a nutritionist for clients.

“They feel better, they’re healthier, and they get to the basics of what they really want,” Wiegman said of his clients. “That’s why we created this practice, and direct primary care allowed us to do that. Before direct primary care, working with corporate medicine or in a regular doctor’s office, you wouldn’t be able to afford to do it.”

Wiegman said people have started looking for direct primary care more in the last five years, and the practices are more common in larger cities. It’s not as common in smaller areas because people don’t know about it yet, he said.

Indiana Direct Primary Care’s staff includes Wiegman, an office manager, a front office person, a nutritionist and personal trainer, and a massage therapist who is independent from the organization. Wiegman likes having a small staff and says it’s easier to manage.

“Direct primary care models are pretty bare bones,” Wiegman said. “That’s part of the way you keep it affordable.”

Indiana Direct Primary Care has about 260 patients, Wiegman said, and the organization’s goal is to have 500. The business also has an “employer clinic” in Kendallville that isn’t open to the general public, but three employers have a contract with the clinic. Wiegman said the clinic has about 400 patients.

Wiegman sees about six patients each day, which he said is vastly different from corporate medicine, where he was encouraged to see at least 20 people each day.

“Oftentimes, I would spend less time with patients than I would with their chart because I didn’t know them very well,” Wiegman said.

The business frequently hears positive feedback from clients, Wiegman said, and he thinks they enjoy having a medical professional available at all times.

‘Really authentic’

Leanna Tollington is one of Wiegman’s patients, and she’s been attending Indiana Direct Primary Care for about two years.

“I was really dissatisfied with the quality of care I was getting and how the doctors were interacting with me as a patient,” she said. “I decided to go there and have had no regrets. It’s been so amazing.”

Tollington’s husband also uses Indiana Direct Primary Care, and their kids go there when they have an issue and she doesn’t want to take them to another doctor.

The couple pay \$99 per person each month for direct primary care, and if their kids attend, it’s about \$20, Tollington said.

Direct primary care has made her more comfortable talking about health, Tollington said, and she feel like her doctor spends more time with her.

“He’s really authentic,” Tollington said of Wiegman. “You can tell that he cares about his patients. He’s a good listener, very open to discussing things, and he’s empowering.”

Wiegman believes the future for direct primary care looks bright, and he is considering opening a new office with another company.

“I think that new generations are more focused on healthy lifestyles,” he said. “I think there’s definitely a growth opportunity here.”

mwilkins@jg.net

Maya Wilkins

Reporter