



Dr. Deepak Kapoor / Photo by Bob Giglione

Doctors respond to pressure to improve access

By: Bernadette Starzee February 2, 2016 0

Urgent care centers have popped up across Long Island, offering patients access to medical care during evenings and weekends when their doctors aren't available.

Growing competition from these convenient providers is one of many phenomena putting pressure on physicians' practices to be more accessible to patients, leading them in some cases to expand hours and offer on-demand appointment scheduling.

"What you're seeing is a shift to more consumer-focused healthcare – that is where I see the market going," said Dr. Deepak Kapoor, the Melville-based president of Advanced Urology Centers of New York, a specialty practice with 45 locations in the New York area. "People are choosing to go not only to urgent care centers but also walk-in clinics in places like Walmart. Since the Affordable Care Act, we're seeing a significant change in how healthcare is paid for. A lot of people on exchanges have high-deductible plans, and other insurance plans have been modified so that the amount people have to pay out of pocket has increased tremendously. The more you have to pay for a service, the more you want input on how it's delivered."

Healthcare is moving away from a fee-per-service model to one in which providers are compensated for keeping entire populations healthy. With the new model, there's financial pressure on providers to gain access to more patients.

"It has to be easy for patients to communicate with the provider, on the patient's terms," Kapoor said. "If you put up roadblocks, they're going to choose to do something else. If you want to manage the population, you have to put practices in place that increase accessibility and affordability."

Advanced Urology Centers of New York participates in the ZocDoc online portal, in which patients can view doctors by specialty, insurance and location, see when their next availability is and make an appointment.

Some practices are extending their hours to improve accessibility.

Many of the 37 offices of Allied Physicians Group, a group of mostly pediatric practices throughout the New York area, have extended their weekday hours, staying open until 7 or 8 p.m. as opposed to 5 or 6 p.m., according to Dr. Gary Mirkin, the Great Neck-based CEO of the group.

Most were already open on Saturdays and are making it known to patients that they are also available on Sundays.

"Pediatricians in general have always left spots in their schedule for acute illness, and they're going to see the child the same day 99 times out of 100. Many of our offices have had long hours for years, so it's not a dramatic difference," said Mirkin, whose Great Neck pediatric office has been open from 8 a.m. till 8 p.m. for many years. "But the urgent care centers have done a good job marketing. We may be here in the evening, but oftentimes people don't think of calling us if it's dark outside. We don't have the word 'urgent' in our name – maybe that's part of the issue.

"Some offices used to turn phones off during lunch hours, but they have stopped doing that," Mirkin added.

Not only do patients flock to urgent care centers in the evenings, but "a lot of them go during the day when they know we're in the office, which can be frustrating," Mirkin said. "They can just walk into an urgent care center, but in doctor's offices they usually have to make an appointment." However, in a couple of its offices, Allied Physicians Group is experimenting with walk-in appointments for acute illnesses.

Increasingly, physician's practices – both primary and specialty – are reaching out to urgent care centers to develop relationships with the goal of improving continuity of care.

"We're forming relationships with these urgent care centers, and it's two-way," Kapoor said. "We may in certain circumstances direct a patient to an urgent care center, which can effectively triage the patient to see if it's appropriate for us to get involved. And for patients seen in an urgent care center that need a specialist, the urgent care centers want to have relationships with specialists, to have the ability to call them for a consult or to be able to call and get an appointment for the patient quickly. If a patient has a urinary tract infection or a kidney stone and needs to see a urologist, the urgent care center can say, 'We've got a relationship with a reputable doctor and we can get you in to see him right away.'"

Allied Physicians Group has begun meeting with PM Pediatrics and City MD, two large urgent care networks that see a lot of Allied's patients, to establish better communication.

"We're not going to grab back all the visits, but we would at least like to know about them and work on a system so that if the patient needs a follow-up visit, it can be scheduled with our office right at the urgent care center, for better continuity of care," Mirkin said.

Dr. Joel Shu is vice president of clinical transformation/population health for Rockville Centre-based Catholic Health Services of Long Island and medical director of CHS-Beacon, an independent practice association that includes about 300 practices and 800 doctors.

"Primary care doctors are spending longer hours because of a multitude of pressures," Shu said. "One of our goals at CHS is to expand access to care during hours that are more convenient to patients."

The principles of patient-centered care rely on "convenient scheduling, expanded hours, on-demand scheduling and free information transfer between the patient and various care providers," Shu said. "Things like easy access to scheduling and expanded hours require a major investment, and we are working with our practices to streamline their work flow so they can accept patients more on demand.

"I visited one of our practices a few weeks ago," Shu continued. "It has very good doctors, and their patients clearly value their skills, but sometimes patients couldn't get an appointment for weeks because the doctors were so occupied. We want to help practices like that become more operationally efficient, so that patients can come in if they're not feeling well. If a doctor says it will be three weeks before they can get in, they may go to an urgent care center or the emergency room, and that's not good for the patient or the practice, or for containing healthcare costs overall or improving the health of the population."

CHS has begun implementing on-demand appointment scheduling, which includes a care management service that matches patients with appointments based on factors such as the doctor's specialty, location, insurance plan and availability.

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