

Health memberships mean better access

By SUE REID

When it comes to the advantages of a membership-style practice, or "concierge medicine," as the trend is more widely known, the proof is in the numbers.

Dr. Todd W. Locke, a partner in Custom Care MD, a membership-style practice at University Suburban Health Center in South Euclid, told a group of future South Franklin Circle residents last month that his once-traditional practice was comprised of 3,000 patients.

In January, he joined Dr. Richard Tomm as a partner in Custom Care MD. He plans to limit the number of patients in his new practice to less than one quarter of a traditional practice, he said.

That translates into seeing no more than eight to 10 patients in a day, compared to 25 patients, he said. In addition, the practice promotes lengthy office visits, up to 45 minutes for routine visits and 90 minutes for a physical examination.

Patients also have 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week access to doctors with this type of practice, Dr. Locke said, with abilities of reaching professionals at any time. Same-day appointments are guaranteed, and it is not unheard of for doctors to make house calls, he said.

"The overall intent is to improve the satisfaction of patients and their quality of life," he said.

Dr. Locke said the idea for this type of practice originated in Seattle and Boca Raton, Fla., and membership-style practices have spread to major cities on both coasts.

"For me, it's the way to practice medicine," Dr. Locke said. "Medicine, in my view, is struggling to provide



Photo by Sue Reid

Dr. Todd W. Locke (left) explained the benefits of a membership-style practice to Thomas and Helen Evans, of Orange, who attended the recent presentation.

patients what they need." He cited difficulties in scheduling routine appointments and "less and less face-to-face time with doctors."

Doctors also have become dissatisfied with the course of medicine, Dr. Locke said. He gave as an example statistics which indicated that in 1996 there were 44,000 applicants to medical school. In 2003, that number dropped to 33,000, he said. "Talented college students are choosing other

careers."

He said that being part of a membership-style practice "is the most satisfying professional time of my life."

This type of practice involves a annual membership fee of \$1,000 to \$2,000 for an individual, based on age, Dr. Locke said, and a discount is provided for couples.

The practice bills either commercial insurance for younger patients or Medicare for the usually covered med-

ical services. Dr. Locke explained that, under this type of practice, Medicare continues to cover the usual medical services, including office visits, labs, surgery, radiology and hospitalizations.

"There are no other out-of-pocket expenses beyond that for Medicare enrollees," he said. "We don't bill beyond what Medicare pays us."

Dr. Locke said that, with this new style of practice, he personally coordinates all of the specialty care provided to his patients with selected specialists at University Hospitals and the Cleveland Clinic. "Each patient receives a detailed baseline evaluation that focuses on prevention, nutrition, exercise and personal habits and lifestyle," he said.

Dr. Locke noted that, for individuals who travel regularly, the service is still very much applicable. "We have connections in some cities with concierge doctors," he said. "I spend a lot of time on the phone with doctors in Florida. We coordinate with those doctors."

Dr. Tomm is an expert in travel medicine and would provide all immunizations or advice for overseas travel that would be needed, Dr. Locke noted. That care is included in the annual membership fee.

Dr. Locke, who has practiced internal medicine for 20 years, is an associate clinical professor of medicine at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine and former chief medical officer and acting president of Qual-Choice.

A native of Sharon, Pa., he holds a bachelor of arts degree with honors in philosophy from Bucknell University and a medical degree from the Pennsylvania State University College of Medicine. He is a published author in the area of clinical quality improvement.