The Value of Having a Primary Care Doctor

One primary care doctor per 10,000 people in the U.S. can decrease hospital admissions by 5.5 percent, emergency room visits by 11 percent and surgeries by 7 percent.

By Michael Rabovsky, M.D. | May 29, 2015

Do you want to live longer; enjoy better health; avoid unnecessary emergency room visits, hospitalizations and surgeries; and pay lower health care costs? I surmise that for nearly everyone, the answer is “yes.” Each of these goals can be attained through a relationship with a primary care doctor. Primary care doctors provide accessibility as your first contact with the health care system; accountability, addressing the vast majority of your health care needs; and coordination of care across settings, integrating your acute and chronic needs and guiding access to focused specialty care when needed. They promote health and prevention, and strive to develop a sustained partnership and personal relationship with you.

What may seem like a myriad of roles and responsibilities are actually the basic tenets of a typical primary care practice. As an example, just last week in my family medicine office, I treated patients from two weeks of age to 98 years of age. I partnered with my patients to help control their chronic conditions, including diabetes, coronary artery disease, asthma, hypertension, obesity and depression. I saw patients with acute issues such as back pain, sinusitis, asthma exacerbations, shingles, swollen knees and urinary tract infections. I assisted a patient in deciding the most appropriate treatment option for her newly diagnosed breast cancer, and helped another patient and his family transition to hospice care. I drained an abscess and froze a wart. I directed patients to specialty care when appropriate and tried to choose the right specialist for each patient. And I performed annual wellness exams and follow-up visits. Throughout, I encouraged healthy lifestyles and verified that my patients were up-to-date on immunizations and health screenings. Similar to many primary care practices, my patients and I are supported by a dedicated team of physician assistants (PAs), nurses and medical assistants.

The Institute of Medicine defines primary care as "the provision of integrated, accessible health care services by clinicians who are accountable for addressing a large majority of personal health care needs, developing this extended partnership with patients and practicing in the context of family and community." Studies show that in states and areas of our country where there is more primary care, health outcomes are superior at a lower cost. People are less likely to be hospitalized, and there are lower death rates for cancer, heart disease and stroke. There are lower infant mortality rates, higher birth weights and higher immunization rates. Internationally, the United States has the most expensive health care system in the world, spending more money per capita than any other country. Sadly, however, according to the World Health Organization, the United States ranks only 24th in health care outcomes among industrialized countries around the world. Those countries with better health care outcomes are more focused on primary care with more primary care doctors per capita, providing better access and directing their patients through their health care system. Some of these countries achieve better outcomes at half our cost! To further underscore the value of primary care, it is estimated that one primary care doctor per 10,000 people in the U.S. can decrease hospital admissions by 5.5 percent, emergency room visits by 11 percent and surgeries by 7 percent.

Primary care doctors treat people, not diseases, with comprehensive, continuous and compassionate care and will be your advocate and guide through the health care system. Find a primary care doctor with whom you feel comfortable talking and sharing your concerns. That doctor-patient partnership will help you live longer and enjoy better health.