

dear doctor

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Concierge docs aim for convenience

Q. What is concierge medicine, and how do I know if this type of delivery of care is right for me?

A. Concierge medicine is a type of medical care delivery in which a physician limits his or her practice to a much smaller number of patients and promises to deliver a much greater level of service. Two internists in Seattle initiated this style of medical care in 1995.

Although there are many variations in concierge practice setup, they are all designed to alleviate the perceived inconveniences of modern primary care. Most offer same-day appointments, minimal waiting room time and prolonged visit-times with the physician. They also feature 24/7 physician availability, via cell phone and email, with the physician willing to see the patient at any hour if necessary, thus eliminating the need for nonurgent trips to the emergency room. In addition, many of these practices offer house calls.

There is an additional charge associated with this added level of service. Fees vary widely by practice type, the level of services offered and geographical location. These fees range from \$50 to \$100 per month to the \$25,000 per year that the physicians who started this in Seattle charge. If you are considering a concierge physi-

cian, you should discuss with the physician what services are covered and what insurance coverage you should carry for any other needed services. One can find a physician who practices concierge medicine via the Internet by searching "concierge doctor" in one's geographic location. In the Pittsburgh area there are only a few physicians who practice this type of medical care delivery.

If a patient is interested in having increased accessibility to their physician, increased flexibility in scheduling and increased time with the physician, joining a concierge practice may be something to investigate. These practices provide a physician who is intimately familiar with the patient, available 24/7 and able to spend as much time as necessary with the patient. The downside to joining such a practice is the cost. The patient must decide if these extra services are worth the extra cost incurred. Concierge practices provide an option in primary health care delivery.

Write to "Dear Doctor," Allegheny County Medical Society, 713 Ridge Ave., Pittsburgh, PA 15212, or email acms@acms.org. Individual responses will not be provided. This column acts as an overview; see your physician for diagnosis.