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How Would You Want Your Mother Treated?

That question drives award-winning practice

STAFF REPORT

THE VILLAGES — The only medical practice in Florida to be named a “Level II Patient-Centered Medical Home” by the National Committee for Quality Assurance is coming to The Villages. The Family Doctors of Belleview are the first physicians to join The Villages Health. Dr. Joseph Hildner and his staff will begin serving this fall in The Villages Health Care Center at Colony Plaza. The Colony Plaza office will be the first in a series of such facilities to be located strategically throughout the community to serve Villages residents.

According to Villages developer Gary Morse, bringing in the very best doctors will be the foundation of this Villages Health initiative to establish care centers throughout the community. “We’re looking for excellence – it’s what our residents deserve and we’re committed to making it happen. That’s why our very first recruit is this practice, the only one in the State of Florida to win this coveted award,” Morse said. “Dr. Hildner and his team have demonstrated that you can practice modern medicine the old-fashioned way. They share our vision of modern-day ‘Marcus Welbys’ who are eager to work in a different kind of system that puts the medical needs of our residents first.” Hildner, a University of Notre Dame alumnus and Loyola University of Chicago medical school graduate, launched his practice in Belleview in the 1980s. There were two doctors and a part-time physician’s assistant when they moved to their current location in 1996. Now there are eight doctors and two PAs, as well as a satellite office near The Villages.

“Since we started, I’ve always been practicing on two levels,” Hildner said. “On one hand I was just a doctor, looking down throats and writing prescriptions and rendering health care. But I was also watching myself do it and studying what was working and what was not working and what would be a better way of doing this. “Now I am trying to create a system that is intelligently designed and where people rethink the way they do things.”

Hildner said that rethinking starts with one simple question: How would you want your mother treated? “That is at the center of everything we do,” Hildner said. “The way we designed our building to emphasize comfort, convenience and privacy. The way we schedule patients to make sure we spend enough time with them to really get to know and understand them.

“We focus-group it. We work it. We always talk about how we can do better. We talk to patients about the little things that nag at them and try to figure out a better way to get it done.” This concept is hardly revolutionary. Patient-centric care was the norm just a few decades ago and was exemplified by television doctor “Marcus Welby, M.D.” But it’s easier to yearn for those days than to actually return to them.

“There was a lot that was good about ‘Marcus Welby,’ but he didn’t have as much to deal with as doctors do today,” Hildner said. “Doctors today have so many more challenges. They’re pulled in so many different directions that too often those doctor-patient relationships suffer. We face those challenges here, too, but the difference is we are always trying to figure out how to meet them and still treat patients the way we would want our mother treated.”

At the forefront of Hildner’s practice is the role of the personal physician who provides first contact and continuous and comprehensive care. This doctor is responsible for providing for all of the patient’s health care needs or arranging care with specialists when necessary.

“It’s amazing how much can be done right between these walls,” Hildner said. “But there are also times when the patient needs care that goes beyond the primary care doctor’s level of expertise. In those cases, he’s the one who holds the lantern and says, ‘I’ll take you. I know what you need and where you need to go instead of having you whip out the Yellow Pages or ask your foursome on the golf course about it.’” Hildner cited an example of a man experiencing heartburn that antacids don’t help. He tells some friends about it and they say that it sounds like a heart problem.

“So the guy is scared and he calls up some cardiologist and has a nuclear stress test and an electrocardiogram and 16 other things done to him,” Hildner said. “Thousands of dollars later they say it’s not his heart. Maybe it’s an ulcer, so here’s the GI guy and he runs all these tests. Thousands of dollars later they tell him to switch to decaf. The guy’s still no better, but two doctors have just had their way with him.”

The primary care doctor brings an organized approach, Hildner said.

“Maybe you need to go to the cardiologist today and we’ll help you with that,” he said. “Or we can treat you appropriately and if the symptoms are gone, you’re done. As a primary care doctor, I am an advocate. It’s my job to care for a patient or see to it that the care I don’t render is delivered in a way that makes sense and by people who are competent.”

Another key part of the concept is electronic medical records. Under this system, a patient’s health history can be easily and accurately shared by primary care doctors, specialists and hospitals.

The first care center in Colony Plaza eventually will be staffed with eight doctors and four physician assistants. Three doctors and two PAs will be on duty at any given time. Ultimately, there will be another six to eight similar centers spaced throughout The Villages.

All of these new medical practices mean there will be a need for more physicians, and Hildner knows exactly what kind of doctor he wants.

“I believe in my heart of hearts that throughout the land there are ‘Dr. Welbys’ out there — people who care about the right stuff and treat people like they want their mother to be treated,” he said. “They’re tired of the systematic overuse of technology, they hate the system they are in and they feel like a petunia in an onion patch.

“When the word gets out that there is a place coming into existence where primary care is valued, and where they can do the kinds of things they love doing and practice medicine the way they know in their hearts it should be practiced, they’re going to line up to come here.”