

From Saturday, March 10, 2012 — The Daily Sun

America's Healthiest Hometown

The Villages strives to change medical care, bring back days of 'Marcus Welby'

STAFF REPORT

THE VILLAGES — Just as The Villages has set the quality standard for all active adult retirement communities over the last several decades, The Villages-USF Health partnership is now poised to revolutionize health care.

Over the coming months and years, The Villages Health will establish a new patient-focused model of care reminiscent of the days of Marcus Welby, the fictional family doctor whose warm bedside manner and availability was a sharp contrast from today's medical system that compensates doctors for quantity rather than quality.

"Medicare is a lifesaving program but it has been set up in such a way that doctors are no longer able to care for us senior citizens in the same manner that we grew up with," said Villages developer Gary Morse. "Medicare pays a doctor for every patient he sees, not how much time he spends with that patient. If the doctor sees 100 patients a day, he or she makes twice as much as seeing 50 patients."

The result of that volume-driven system has changed the way most doctors operate.

"Now doctors are incentivized to go into business, hire a business manager, set up their own records system, buy their own testing equipment and get paid for every test they can give to as many patients as they can run through their office," Morse said.

The Villages Health will operate differently. Physicians will be paid generous salaries that are not tied to the volume of patients seen in a day or the number of tests or procedures ordered. And although Medicare reimbursements will still be utilized, that payment system will no longer drive how patients are treated. The salaried physicians will be able to focus on their patients as individuals, giving them the personal time and attention they need.

"Freed from being businessmen caught in a volume-driven model, our physicians can get back to doing what they, no doubt, got into medicine for in the first place – caring for patients," Morse said.

These physicians will be located in Villages Health Care centers conveniently located throughout the community.

"Residents will have the opportunity to be only a golf car ride away from their family doctor," said Morse, adding that the first such facility will open in Colony Plaza before the end of the year, with others soon to follow.

Such a patient-centered model will eliminate many of the frustrations patients have in seeing their doctor.

"It means there will be no more getting sick and calling in for their doctor only to be told that the first open appointment is two weeks from next Thursday," said Elliot Sussman, a USF Health faculty member and consultant to The Villages on health care. "It also means no more being stacked in one of five or six exam rooms, waiting for a rushed visit from the physician in and out the door before you've had time to think or ask questions."

According to Sussman, excellent doctors from both the tri-county area and beyond have already expressed enthusiasm for serving in such a system.

"There are great doctors who are frustrated by the current 'numbers game' and would love to practice medicine in a more 'Marcus Welby' fashion," Sussman said. "That's why they got into medicine in the first place and our Villages Health model will give them that opportunity."

"Villagers expect and enjoy the very best in lifestyle, the very best in convenience, the very best in amenities," Morse said. "The vision behind The Villages Health is that our residents also enjoy the very best in medical care. That all begins with a primary care physician who has the time to know you and serve you and is committed to your living a longer and healthier life."

While these primary care physicians are the foundation of the new Villages Health model, that's only the beginning, according to Morse.

"We're also looking at how specialty services can be more patient friendly and effective," he said. "Ultimately, we would like for Villagers to enjoy a 'Mayo Clinic style' model, where all your doctors work together with most services under one roof, utilizing one electronic medical records system."

“Many of our Villagers currently drive three and a half hours to Mayo in Jacksonville to experience this quality of medical care,” Morse added. “Our ultimate goal is for Villagers to have such care right here in our own community.”

Dr. Darrell G. Kirch, president and CEO of the Association of American Medical Colleges, applauded The Villages Health’s plan to change the way medical care is provided.

“From engaging in a broad-based community research effort to identifying true healthcare partners, The Villages is taking the steps that healthcare providers (and communities) must take if we, as a nation, will truly improve the health of the public,” Kirch wrote recently after a visit to The Villages. “I was most impressed with the Villagers I met, who demonstrated a strong conviction to create a new healthcare system for your community. I will watch with great interest as The Villages continues to work toward its vision of being the healthiest community.”