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Physicians try informal approach to reach new patients

Written by Elizabeth Bassett

Odds are that if you were searching for a new doctor, you'd ask nearby friends and family for a recommendation or you'd pick a name off a list from your health insurance provider.

Some people may turn online, as well, for ratings from patients or former patients. But none of these ways gives a person an opportunity to meet a physician before an actual appointment and to make an educated decision about whether this is the right professional for the job.

A Tarrant County hospital is taking a speed dating-type approach to letting physicians meet potential patients. After about five minutes of talking to a physician, a person can make a better decision about whether he or she would like to become a patient. And if the match is no good? Then move on to the next physician, no strings attached.

Physicians who have attended the events, called Doc Shops, at Texas Health Harris Methodist Hospital H-E-B have positive reviews of the concept, which was developed and led by Mandy Forbus, senior marketing specialist at the hospital. A few Doc Shops were held last year, and seven are scheduled so far for 2010.

In the fall of 2009, Forbus was looking for a way to empower women who wanted to choose an obstetrics/gynecology physician. She organized three events, each of which could be done during a lunch break and

drew a small crowd of about 12 to 14 potential patients.

The physicians, OB/GYNs on staff at the hospital, each had a table where they sat, and patients rotated through and had the opportunity to ask questions of them. Forbus said that when talking to the participants, many said they had a physician already but didn't see eye-to-eye with the doctor.

"I was really surprised at how many women said, 'I don't go to my doctor because I don't want to,'" she said.

Dr. Emily Emmet, an OB/GYN on staff at Texas Health HEB, attended two of the fall Doc Shops and said it helped cut to the chase for patients, such as one woman she met who wanted a doctor who could focus on holistic and alternative medicine. An event like the Doc Shop let that patient easily weed out doctors who don't meet her criteria, Emmet said.

"Every opportunity to outreach like that, you might think you're getting one patient, but it turns into a dozen, easily," she said.

Dr. Manisha Parikh, another OB/GYN on staff at the hospital, said a patient knowing his or her physician leads to better health care, because the patient is more inclined to listen to medical advice if there is a level of trust present.

“You are in a relationship with your doctor, and I think for a patient to really respect what you say and follow what you say, they need to really know you,” Parikh said. “. . . You have to have a joint and mutual respect for them.”

Parikh, who also attended two of the Doc Shops in 2009, said some other physicians who haven’t been to one of the events may dismiss the idea.

“I think people who haven’t been, their instinct is initially, this is silly and a waste of time, why do I do this?” she said.

Emmet said she’s attended events at other hospitals that are meant to be like mixers for doctors and potential patients, but the two groups tend to keep to themselves. She compared it to a middle-school dance, with each group standing on opposite sides of the room, eyeing each other warily.

Forbus said she isn’t aware of any similar program at any other hospitals in the nation, but she said Texas Health H-E-B is in the process of putting together information to share throughout the Texas Health Resources system, which has several hospitals in Tarrant County.

Devon M. Herrick, a health economist at the National Center for Policy Analysis in Dallas, said the current health industry, which centers around insurance reimbursements, doesn’t allow physicians much time off from working to do added-benefit activities, like meeting prospective patients.

A physician who takes an hour out of their day to participate in a Doc Shop won’t be earning any money during that time, he said, just as many physicians aren’t reimbursed for time spent talking to patients on the phone or via e-mail.

“Really, I think we don’t see that as much as we should because our third-party payer dominates health care. . . . It makes it hard for the physician to really compete for your business,” he said.

However, the chance to meet a physician before committing to an appointment (which comes with a co-pay and possibly taking time off work) is something that would make the industry better, he said.

Additionally, getting feedback from other patients also is important, even though he said he’s heard of physicians making patients sign agreements that they won’t provide feedback to physician rating services.

“These are all things in any other service that you’d want and demand and would be very important to the service,” Herrick said.