

Does the 15-minute doctor visit really work?

by Dr. Delia Chiamonte, [Baltimore Health Examiner](#)



Our current medical system leaves some people out in the cold. If you have a virus, simple hypertension or even stable diabetes, the typical 15-minute office visit works just fine. But what if you have chronic diarrhea, fatigue and joint pain yet every test has been normal? Or what if your cancer came back and your doctors, who want to try chemo again even though the chance of success is small, can't help you wade through your alternative therapy options? What if your mom is really sick and you can't get her doctor to talk to you?

For most people the system of overwhelmed, busy-bee doctors rushing around the office is good enough, but some people – the most needy people – are left feeling abandoned and alone with their illness.

A new practice model, called concierge medicine, is cropping up to address the needs of complicated patients and burned out doctors. Concierge doctors charge an annual fee, often between \$1,000 and \$10,000, to all of their patients. In exchange they promise to limit their practice significantly so that they will have more time for you. Instead of caring for 2,500 patients like the typical family doctor, a concierge doctor might be responsible for only 250 – 1000 patients. The fewer patients the doctor has the more you pay, but also the more you get. You get a doctor with time for you, who can often see you the day you call and who may even answer her own phone. You get longer visits, more focus on wellness and more look-you-in-the-eye doctor compassion.

Why would paying an annual fee get you more compassion? Is doctors' compassion actually for sale?

The old adage about getting blood from a stone comes to mind. When a doctor has to see 30 patients a day, rushing from room to room, always running late and feeling pressured, how much space in his heart do you think he'll have for your non life-threatening complaints? If his cup is empty, how can he fill yours?

I have learned of a few local doctors who have recently morphed their practices into concierge practices. I understand this desire – I almost did this myself. For empathetic doctors who want to have more time to heal their patients this is an attractive option. My current patient advocacy practice is a bit like a la carte concierge medicine – you keep your regular doctor but get extra services when you need them.

I do understand the inevitable concerns that our system is becoming more inequitable. Those who can afford to pay for their doctor's extra attention get it while everyone else gets in line for their 15 minutes with an overwhelmed regular primary care doctor. I agree that this isn't right. Yet does that mean that doctors and patients who want a better way shouldn't pursue it?

There is no answer.

The system is broken and a few entrepreneurial doctors are shaking things up. We'll have to watch closely and see where it all leads us.

Be well.

Dr. C

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