

***“A House Call Doctor”*** by Toby Laping

Do you remember being sick as a child and your pediatrician came to your house because he thought you were too sick to go to his office? Now, as a senior, how would you like to have a doctor who thinks the same way? Better yet, how about a physician whose routine check up visits take place in your house? There is such a doctor in Western New York.

Dr. Eugene Steinberg worked for some years as a geriatric physician for the V.A. until he left to develop a medical practice in which he routinely goes to the homes of frail elderly people who can't get out to see a doctor. Almost a decade ago, he opened his home based practice using large amounts of medical skill, good common sense, and a respect for patients' wishes to continue to live in their homes. The practice now consists of Dr. Steinberg and three medical assistants, one of whom goes on each home visit with the doctor.

His aim is to provide top quality, coordinated health care and medical management for people who have difficulty leaving their homes, in addition to saving money for the health care delivery system. The benefits of home visits are many in addition to the obvious one of health care for people who would not otherwise get to see a doctor. It's during home visits that one gets a sense of how people live, how they manage their medications, and how their meals are prepared. It's during home visits that one can see how personal care is provided and whether the physical set up is as safe as it should be. Very often the descriptions patients give during office visits are totally different from what one observes in their homes, and those differences can be key to medical compliance and good health. It's common sense that some time spent getting to know patients, their environments, their families, and their strengths as well as their problems will result in better health outcomes. Common sense isn't sufficient, tho, and this is in process of being verifiably measured.

The health care delivery system is not supportive of medical practices such as Dr. Steinberg's. Traditional, office based medical practices are reimbursed by a formula related to the numbers of patients seen. By contrast, Dr. Steinberg necessarily sees fewer patients and spends more time with each patient, but the system penalizes him financially because his raw numbers of patients seen are lower than in an office. The system gives sufficient credit to the greater amount of time spent in homes, for travel time, or for the time spent in coordinating various services required to be delivered to the house. And, the payment system does not give adequate credence to outcomes.

Dr. Steinberg refers to statistics showing that 5% of the people on Medicare use 50% of Medicare dollars. These 5% are people with multiple medical issues, many medications, and social problems that impact health, and they're obviously expensive. The doctor argues persuasively that more time spent with these 5%, particularly in their home environments, would be cost effective in keeping them healthier and freer of the expensive procedures that use so many Medicare dollars.



We know that dollars spent on health care for the elderly are growing exponentially and that home based, personalized medical care is expensive but also appears to be cost effective. So, perhaps it's time to consider this alternative practice of medicine with a more open, financially viable mindset. And by the way, Dr. Steinberg's practice is as busy as you'd expect with a wait of several months for new patients.