

Looking to Luke

By AMY WHITE
BEE STAFF WRITER

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For physician Robert Forester, the idea came three years ago during a moment of deep prayer while on vacation in Tahoe City. As he gazed at a pine tree, the concept "landed right in my lap," he said.

A medical practice where benefactor patients pay a lump yearly sum for personalized care, allowing doctors to provide medical care to other patients who do not have insurance.

A Catholic since 1993 and in private practice for 14 years, Forester felt the idea was a "sign of the Holy Spirit" working in his life.

Excited, the 44-year-old began to share the idea with other doctors. But no one grasped the concept until he mentioned it to colleague R.J. Heck, a doctor with another medical group in Modesto.

For Heck, the idea rang true.

Heck, though only in his 30s, had suffered a stroke in early 2002. He was unconscious for 20 minutes, but through the quick action of his wife, who performed CPR, and doctors, he survived.

"So many things came together in the perfect way to return me to a healthy, unaffected state that I consider it a miracle and that God was definitely with me that morning," said Heck, 39. The experience deepened his own Catholic faith.

"Afterwards, I felt as though I needed to give something back, to do something a little different," said Heck, who has been in private practice nine years.

By late 2002, the doctors had decided to go forward with their plan to give up their lucrative practices and start what is now St. Luke's Family Practice -- named for the biblical apostle St. Luke, "the beloved physician" (Col. 4:14) and patron saint of physicians.

It is a unique medical practice, combining three models of health care: high-tech/high-touch, in which a doctor computerizes the practice, has less staff and spends more time with patients; boutique care, when people prepay for their family practice care for a year; and a foundation that provides beneficent care to the uninsured.

"We haven't been able to find anybody in the country that is doing all three together," Heck said.

Doing so means a pay cut of about a third for the doctors, who also will reduce their load from about 2,600 patients each to between 600 and 900 patients each.



Dr. R.J. Heck and Dr. Robert Forester are making less money, but are also seeing fewer patients and are living out their Catholic faith by offering free service to uninsured patients. The two opened their new clinic in January. Service for uninsured patients will begin in April.
AL GOLUB/THE BEE

Forester is the father of four children; Heck has two. But their wives threw their full support behind them.

"There are lots of parts of living your faith and getting it out of the parish parking lot," Forester said. "This gives us a tremendous opportunity to do that."

Practicing medicine, faith

"The beauty of St. Luke's is we are able to get out of the more commercial aspects of medicine. We've established a nonprofit organization and we are employees of that organization. We get to spend our entire day getting to practice medicine, and we get to do that in concert with our faith."

It is the kind of medical practice they dreamed of in medical school, Heck said.

The doctors work out of a small Florida Avenue office with just enough room for waiting areas, reception -- staffed by one person -- and two exam rooms, which also serve as their offices, decorated with family pictures and diplomas.

"It is kind of the old-fashioned medicine, and that is what enticed me to do it," said Jamie Huber, 40, of Modesto, who joined as a benefactor with her husband and two children. "I get extremely personalized health care I haven't found anywhere else, and it is also benefitting those who don't have insurance."

"We think it harkens back to the 1950s era when there was a general practitioner who knew your family very well, didn't have many patients and would come to your house if you needed them to," Heck said. "That's the kind of doctor we would like to be for these benefactors."

The doctors' services include preventive health care, gynecology, stitching cuts and treating ailments ranging from the common cold to skin lesions to orthopedic injuries.

Early treatment for uninsured

For the uninsured patients, doctors expect to see urgent illnesses or symptoms that people may have put off having treated because of the prohibitive cost.

"They seek care later," Heck said. "What we are hoping to do is make a dent in that, so people can get care a little earlier and to relieve some of the burdens on emergency rooms.

"The stats we have indicate that 25 percent of Californians under age 65 go without insurance each year," he added. "It's a huge need -- in the vicinity of 40,000 people in the Modesto/Stanislaus County area."

Most are people who are working but are not offered or cannot afford health insurance, he said.

Heck and Forester hope to enlist a range of specialists to provide additional services at a reduced cost, as well as give away some medications at the office. A few specialists in orthopedics, cardiology and general surgery already have stepped forward to participate, Heck said.

Services to benefactors began Jan. 1. Services to uninsured patients will begin April 1.

The doctors already provide care for uninsured clients at Children's Crisis Center and Redwood Family Center -- a residential facility for women recovering from drug and alcohol addiction, and their children.

Tom Ciccarelli, director of Inter-Faith Ministries, which runs Redwood Family Center, said the access to medical care for the uninsured is invaluable.

"The only option we'd have if they did not have coverage would be to take them to Doctors Medical Center and wait in the emergency room for five or six hours," Ciccarelli said. "I really see this as a team effort in the sense that (the doctors) are going to provide that piece of the puzzle that has been missing."

Ciccarelli, who left a business career to lead Inter-Faith Ministries, said it is one thing to "talk the talk and another thing to walk the walk," when it comes to beneficent causes. "This shows me clearly those are men who are willing to walk like they are talking."

Pro-life practice

Because the men's practice is consistent with Catholic teachings, it affirms a pro-life message, they said. They care for the needy, support marital chastity, encourage the use of natural family planning and provide compassionate hospice care at the end of natural life.

They do not provide or refer for contraception, abortion, sterilization or euthanasia.

But they treat patients of all -- or no -- faiths.

Carl Wesenberg, 45, of Modesto, a previous patient of Forester, joined as a benefactor with his wife and three children.

"My wife and I are not Catholic, but I certainly don't mind (their faith) being the basis of what they are doing," said Wesenberg, who recently sought treatment for a herniated disc and stitches for his 6-year-old son. "The biggest part was seeing him being able to serve the people he wanted to serve."

Patient Sharon Briar, 47, who is Catholic, is comforted by the doctors' openness about their faith.

"He doesn't proselytize to people, and yet there is this feeling that it is OK to talk about it," said Briar, whose daughter was treated by Forester after a recent car accident. "It's cool to walk into the office and see the cross, or the picture of Mother Teresa, and know it is something you can talk about with them, because oftentimes (faith) does play a part in the healing process."

Other people are drawn to the practice because of the office's high-tech records system or boutique care, frustration over insurance, to support Catholic teachings, to help the uninsured or to donate to the community, Forester said.

The doctors have been inspired by the support they've received and "the fact that each time we have hit a big roadblock, somebody has stepped into our lives to make that roadblock go away," Heck said.

For instance, thousands of dollars in medical equipment -- exam tables, microscopes, blood-pressure machines and more -- was donated by Mike Keckler of Keckler Medical Co. in Oakdale. Rotary and other service clubs have also provided assistance.

Ciccarelli finds it affirming to see people stepping forward to fulfill their faith.

"So many people hear the call, but they don't answer," he said. "I think it really is incumbent on all of us if the Lord is calling us to do his work, we have to say, 'Yes.' These are two men who said 'Yes' to their call."

The doctors sum up their philosophy in the biblical passage from 1 Peter 4:10: "As each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of God's varied grace."

St. Luke's Family Practice hours are weekdays (except Wednesdays), 8:30 a.m. to noon and 1:30 to 4:30 p.m. It is open to benefactors on Wednesdays, weekends, evenings and holidays by special arrangement. The office is closed the week of Christmas and the week after Easter. The office is at 1400 Florida Ave., Suite 109. For more information, call 549-1057 or visit www.stlukesfp.org.

Bee staff writer Amy White can be reached at 578-2318 or awhite@modbee.com.

HOW IT WORKS

The practice provides primary health care to people without insurance who do not qualify for government programs, as well as benefactors who make tax-deductible donations to support the work. All receive medical services at no charge. There is no insurance billing.

Benefactors annually pay \$900 to \$1,500 for adults, \$2,300 for couples and \$500 for children, young adults and students, for 24-hour access to the doctors. They receive home visits if necessary, can make appointments on short notice and online, e-mail the doctors, and have access to their home and cell phone numbers. The yearly fee covers all office visits. Benefactor patients do need insurance for services outside the office, such as prescriptions, lab tests, hospital visits and referrals. Currently, the doctors have about half the benefactors they need to support the practice.

To be an uninsured patient, people must be screened for eligibility for Medi-Cal, the county's Medically Indigent Adult program or veterans or other government benefits, either before or after the initial visit. If they qualify for no other benefits, they can become an ongoing patient