

America's Most Valuable Care - Primary Care Snapshots

There are 'bright spots' in the healthcare system—healthcare providers in communities large and small who are consistently delivering better value: high-quality care at a lower-than-average total cost. In early 2013, the Peterson Center on Healthcare, established by the Peter G. Peterson Foundation, and Stanford University's Clinical Excellence Research Center (CERC) set out to find these high-value providers through a systematic analysis of commercial insurance data that had never been done before. Through this approach, eleven primary care practices were identified as 'positive outliers' for the value—higher quality at significantly lower cost—of the care they provide.

The CERC team first looked at single- and multi-specialty U.S. physician practices with at least two clinicians providing primary care. They narrowed the list to those whose performance on quality measures landed them in the top 25 percent. These quality measures were predominantly sourced from HEDIS (Health Effectiveness Data and Information Set)—a universally recognized set used by more than 90 percent of U.S. health plans for assessing quality. Researchers then eliminated all sites where total annual per capita health spending by commercial health insurers did not also fall into the lowest 25 percent—after adjustments to reflect the severity of illness of their patients. Fewer than five percent of the roughly 15,000 sites assessed by the CERC team ranked in both the top quartile on quality and the bottom quartile on costs. Of these, the CERC team conducted a series of in-depth site visits to a sample of the highest performing sites and a sample from sites near the center on cost and quality. An expert clinical panel, blinded to the cost and quality claims data analysis, selected the following sites as providers of Most Valuable Care:

BANNER HEALTH CLINIC INTERNAL MEDICINE - PHOENIX, AZ

Primary care clinic owned by the Banner Health System, staffed by four full- and two part-time internists, nine medical assistants (MAs), seven support staff, and one dedicated nurse case manager.

- Practice follows care pathways developed by clinical consensus; standardization enables greater delegation to MAs.
- Every two physicians are supported by three MAs who work together in a layout that encourages constant communication.
- Physicians prioritize taking the time to help patients to make well-informed care decisions and emphasize access. On occasion, the physicians have opened up the clinic after hours to help a patient rather than send them to the emergency department.

BAPTIST MEDICAL GROUP, MEMPHIS PRIMARY CARE – MEMPHIS, TN

Primary care practice owned by the Baptist Medical Group and run by one family physician and one internist, supported by two medical assistants, two front desk staff, one office manager, and one x-ray technician.

- Practice is noted for seeking and responding to feedback, and using it for improvement in the patient experience.
- Staff systematically ensure patients get recommended care, in or out of the practice, through careful follow-up.
- Physicians have a strong commitment to keep patients out of the hospital. They treat what they safely can in the office, take their own calls two out of three nights and give their cell phone number to patients they think are at risk of a health crisis.

FAMILY PHYSICIANS GROUP – KISSIMMEE, FL

One of 25 locations of an independent, multi-specialty group. This site is led by four primary care physicians, supported by a physician assistant, eleven medical assistants, three case managers, one health coach, and one social worker. The practice sees a high proportion of elderly patients with complex medical and psychosocial needs.

- Practice prides itself on being available to patients 24/7, and has home monitoring in place for its highest risk patients.
- Case managers lead care planning for complex patients and a “concierge” is available to help with things like transportation and translation for their largely Spanish-speaking, socioeconomically disadvantaged patient population.
- Staff members maintain close relationships with a select group of specialists and track the quality and affordability of these specialists’ care, in order to ensure value. They work with insurers to make sure these specialists are in-network.

FLORIDA MEDICAL CLINIC – ZEPHYRHILLS, FL

One of 26 locations of an independent, multi-specialty group. It is led by two full-time internists and one part-time family physician, supported by two nurse practitioners (NPs), five medical assistants and two referral coordinators.

- Practice is noted for providing outstanding access and close care management, sometimes seeing a patient as often as three times a week to avoid a crisis. Attention is paid to post-hospitalization follow-up, which reduces readmission.
- Each Medicare patient receives a comprehensive annual physical conducted by the NPs to emphasize preventative care.
- Physicians manage complex conditions themselves, supported by “curbside consults” from specialists in the group.
- Small office space fosters a lively environment of learning and communication between physicians and staff.

NORTHWEST FAMILY PHYSICIANS – CRYSTAL, MN

Independent three-location primary care group led by sixteen family practice physicians, supported by five physician assistants, one nurse practitioner, fourteen nurses, and sixteen medical assistants.

- Physician champions become up-skilled in a specialty and are able to support their colleagues, performing low-complexity procedures and diagnostics for patients that might otherwise be referred to an outside specialist.
- The practice chooses the specialists they refer to carefully, bringing high volume specialists on-site for patient convenience. This includes a half-day a week cardiologist who reads studies, making guideline-based recommendations.
- Physicians work closely with physician assistants, medical assistants, and triage nurses to offer rapid and responsive access and care, supported by standing orders and protocols, all in the context of a four-day work week for physicians.

RIDGEWOOD MED PEDS – ROCHESTER, NY

An independent, physician-owned primary care clinic with five primary care physicians—all certified in both internal medicine and pediatrics—supported by one nurse practitioner, four licensed practical nurses, one registered nurse, two receptionists, three telephone schedulers, and four record-keepers.

- The practice follows evidence-based protocols. Physicians routinely discuss new evidence and sign on to updated care protocols, which keeps them current and enables them to delegate many tasks to other members of their care team.
- Patients with chronic illnesses are prompted for follow-up visits and tests by indexing those visits to prescription refills.
- Physicians refer to a small, informal network of trusted specialists, and carefully manage the referral process, writing a detailed note outlining their expectations to the specialist, which they also take the time to explain to the patient.

ST. JUDE HERITAGE MEDICAL GROUP – YORBA LINDA, CA

A multi-specialty group practice that is part of the St. Joseph Health system. This site is led by twelve family physicians, six pediatricians, and five internists with one nurse practitioner, one physician assistant, and one licensed vocational nurse. On-site specialists include OB/GYNs, dermatologists, allergists, a gastroenterologist and an endocrinologist.

- The practice offers same-day access and, with integrated urgent care, is open seven days a week. Continuity is emphasized.
- Specialists provide education sessions to primary care physicians to help them take on low-complexity specialty care.
- Patients are seen in a special transition clinic post-hospitalization, which reduced readmissions by 67 percent.
- The office space was designed with patient flow in mind. There are no waiting rooms and care teams work together in a shared space, facilitating communication between patient interactions. This improved physician productivity by 21 percent.

SOUTH COVE COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTER – QUINCY, MA

Independent, federally qualified health center, one of four sites, that serves a predominantly Asian population in the Boston area. There are eleven internal medicine physicians and two nurse practitioners who rotate through the four sites. The Quincy site has five registered nurses, a medical assistant per provider, three front desk staff, and three referral coordinators. The center sees a socioeconomically disadvantaged, predominantly Asian population, many of whom do not speak English.

- The center is open seven days a week, accommodates patient walk-ins, and offers a 24-hour nurse advice line.
- Referrals are carefully coordinated, often include a translator, and are stratified based on urgency. The referral coordinators “close the loop” on urgent referrals and proactively bring patients in for preventive care and screening.
- The center acts to make sure patients’ social and behavioral needs are met. Mental health is integrated in a culturally appropriate way, and patients receive support to help them maintain health insurance coverage.

SURECARE MEDICAL CENTER – SPRINGBORO, OH

Hospital-owned and operated primary care clinic with eight primary care physicians—one internal medicine, six family physicians, one part-time family physician—supported by one physician assistant, with one medical assistant assigned to each physician, two medical assistants for lab draws, one office manager, four front desk staff, and three billers.

- The practice is open six days a week and late into the evening four days per week, maximizing access and convenience. Staggered schedules and sufficient scale help maintain good work-life balance across the care team.
- Physicians refer patients to each other initially, leveraging expertise developed in dermatology and orthopedics.
- SureCare has cross-trained medical assistants and standardized work to increase office efficiency and patient flow. As a result, physicians report being able to be more hands-on with their patients because they have less administrative work.

TRIHEALTH WEST CHESTER MEDICAL GROUP – WEST CHESTER, OH

Primary care clinic that is part of the TriHealth system in Ohio, led by two internists and two family physicians and supported by one registered nurse, three medical assistants, one registered nurse case manager, and one care coordinator.

- The practice is open six days a week and physicians take their own call five days a week in order to ensure continuity.
- The practice risk-stratifies patients to connect patients with the greatest needs to a dedicated care coordinator, which has improved clinical outcomes and reduced cost of care in patients with chronic illnesses, such as diabetes. In addition, higher complexity patients are seen by an internist-RN team who cares for these patients together.
- The front office staff members are all medical assistants, who follow a symptom-based set of protocols that allows them to rapidly assess and triage a wide variety of ailments, enabling clinically informed scheduling.

USAA HEALTH SERVICES (CHS) - SAN ANTONIO, TX

Primary care clinic located at the headquarters of a large insurance/financial organization and staffed by one part-time physician, three advanced practice providers, eight registered nurses, four medical assistants, and five administrative staff.

- Accommodates both scheduled and walk-in patients with wait times that average less than six minutes.
- Uses a large set of evidence-based protocols embedded in the clinic's electronic health record system to guide care delivery using lower cost providers.
- Utilizes a unique risk-stratification tool that gives all patients a risk index score that combines both direct medical costs and measures of occupational health to highlight patients who might benefit from extra support.
- Patients are offered rapid access to select specialists. During allergy season, they run a nurse-staffed allergy clinic supervised by a local allergist to improve access and compliance with allergen desensitization injection regimens. A cardiologist also offers rapid preferential access.