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The doctor is out: He's making house calls

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By Ken Goze

A generation has passed since doctors routinely attended patients in their own homes with a big black leather bag of drugs and instruments, but one Wilmette physician is joining a small but determined movement to bring back the house call.

With aging patients hard pressed to travel to their many appointments and some of them able to pay a premium for personal service, doctors like Chirag Patel of Wilmette are carving out a niche in home-visit medicine.

Late last month, Patel launched Hansa Medical Groupe, a one-doctor practice offering an old-school solution to a modern medical dilemma.

Patel, who has practiced internal medicine for close to a decade, said he often deals with elderly patients who can't travel to clinics as often as they need to because of a stroke, arthritis or the limited availability of family members to drive them.

"Over the years we've just kind of realized that something like the 'horse and buggy' doctor from 50 years ago really would help a lot of the patients," Patel said.

Only 400 patients

Under his business model, Patel will only take up to 400 patients, a fraction of the 3,000 to 4,000 on the work load of many health-maintenance organization doctors these days. They each pay \$2,400 a year as a retainer, in addition to visits, which are billed separately but covered by many insurance plans and Medicare.

Patel is selling the kind of accessibility that most people don't get unless they happen to have a doctor in the family.

"You have the cell phone number and all the personal contact information for myself, and you have availability at any time. If it's Christmas Day or of it's Saturday night or Sunday morning or whenever, you have the liberty to call and if I need to come and see you I come and see you," Patel said.

Patel also likes the idea of being able to provide more personal and less-rushed service.

"I know myself when I spend five, ten minutes for someone who has five different medical problems, it's just not enough time and I don't have a good feeling about it," Patel said.

The tradeoff of Norman Rockwell-style house-call doctoring is that he may never have a real day, or night, off.

So far, he has a handful of patients on his roster. It's a niche business, and an option that Patel said is probably not worth the money for relatively healthy people. It's designed for older patients managing multiple medications and conditions and trying to retain their independence.

Most of Patel's visits will be in patients' homes, although most complex diagnostic work or procedures such as removing skin tags will have to be done at area hospitals or in his clinic at Touhy and Western avenues in Chicago.

There are other "concierge" medicine practices along the North Shore that offer enhanced access and longer visits for a retainer, but Patel said those generally require patients to come to the doctor. He believes he is the only home-care doctor based in the area.



Dr. Chirag Patel exits the front door of his home in Wilmette on Friday. Patel is starting a new practice that specializes in an old model of personalized medicine: house calls. (Allison Williams/Staff Photographer)

Dr. Chirag Patel packs up his medical bag at the dining room table of his home in Wilmette on Friday. In his new practice as a house call doctor, Patel will carry his office with him most days. Patients pay a retainer fee in exchange for the convenience of home-based medicine and seven-days-a-week access. (Allison Williams/Staff Photographer)

