Now It's Mass Medicine

Doctors Start Seeing Groups Of Patients to Save Time; One-on-One vs. One-on-12

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UTTLETON, MD.-Ethiopian Abee, a physician at Kaiser Permanente's Margot Heights Medical Center here, likes to see many of her elderly patients regularly. So she schedules them all to come in once a month. On the same day, at the same time.

It's called a group visit, and it's the latest twist on the most fundamental encounter in medicine: the doctor-patient relationship. Health care across the country, from a Mayo Clinic affiliate in Wisconsin to Stanford University School of Medicine in California, have recently introduced programs in which as many as two dozen patients attend one monthly two-hour group session rather than rely on a traditional individual appointment.

Some doctors set up their group visits around patients with specific chronic ailments—such as diabetes, arthritis or hypertension, or for routine pediatric or gynecologic complaints. Fallon Clinic Inc., Worcester, Mass., has such visits, and its medical director, Jonathan Hardin, praises their efficiency. Rather than saying the same thing 20 different times to 20 different patients, he says, the doctor only has to say it once.

Though it seems paradoxical, both doctors and patients maintain the arrangement rekindles the closeness of the doctor-patient relationship that many argue has been eroded in the era of managed care. Dr. Abee says she gets to know her group-session patients at a level that wasn't achieved during traditional visits. Besides developing their medical complaints, "they've talked about their dating, their marriages," she says, "it makes you feel like you're part of their family.

One of Dr. Abee's patients reciprocates her enthusiasm. "At our age, you don't always get people to talk about what's going on in your life," says 71-year-old Edna Richardson, who attends her monthly group visit with her husband. "We've become so much more aware of our bodies by sharing medical appointments with other patients."

Mass visits often include some private conversation between the doctor and an individual patient as others in the group talk among themselves. For exams that require disrobing, the patient and doctor meet privately before or after the group session. But while many patients say they get whatever private attention they would need, Melody Matthews Lownman, a San Francisco psychotherapist, worries that some of the more reticent among them may have trouble asking for additional time. "A group visit fails to take care of the whole person," she says.

For patients, group programs are always voluntary, and doctors say private appointments are always available for personal or urgent medical problems. Even enthusiastic advocates acknowledge that group visits don't provide for all their doctor needs. Wilma Raitner says she looks forward to her monthly group appointment at a Kaiser clinic in Springfield, Va., but doesn't consider it a substitute for a private visit. "I don't necessarily choose to talk about what ails her in front of other people," says the 56-year-old from Fairfax, Va.

One woman wants nothing to do with groups. One woman says she was accommodated well by her pediatrician recently suggested that she and her son start coming to pediatric visits with other children and parents. Don't worry, she was told, they will be same-sex groups so that the little boys won't be embarrassed about taking off their clothes in front of little girls. She found an alternative manner of care she was thrilled about the idea, especially with the parsimony of a one-on-one vs. one-on-12 relationship," say a Sigma Corp. spokesman. Since communications have become codes for such simplicity, even though doctors can cut a clinician's cost the same as a regular visit.

At a clinic operated by Kaiser Permanente in Springfield, Va., a doctor addresses a setting resembling a college seminar.

Clinics say that private appointments are still available for personal or urgent medical problems.
Doctors Start Seeing Patients by the Group

Continued from Page B1

There is joy her patient doesn't hesitate. "I get a lot of gas, especially in mornings and it's painful," she replies. "It's quite embarrassing." Dr. Abee tells her the reaction should subside after a few more days on the medication.

As the doctor does her one-on-ones, the rest of her patients help themselves to a table filled with fruit and low-calorie cakes that the patients themselves have brought in. Then, as Dr. Abee makes notations in the patients' thick files, another doctor arrives to give a slide presentation about the dangers of diabetes, how being overweight and having hypertension can lead to the disease, and how exercise can help fend it off—medical education that often gets left out in a private appointment.

When the doctor making the presentation proclaims that the current rate, 100% of all Americans will be overweight or obese by the year 2233, one woman cries out. "Have mercy!" When he talks about the link between waist size and diabetes, Leon Roberts, 75 years old, takes a deep, loud breath, pulls on his stomach and juts out his chest. "I shall be slim one day," he proclaims. They all laugh, including the young physician.

After nearly two hours, the group visit is over, but several of the patients stay behind to catch up and to talk to the nurses. "You're not just a number to them," says Hannah Burke, 80, who lives 30 miles away but hasn't missed one group visit since they started in 1998. "They really know you," she says. For her part, Dr. Abee thinks her group patients are much more likely to follow her orders and thus much less likely to come back with the same problems. "It sort of makes you feel like you've done a miracle," she says.

Little evidence exists so far to gauge whether group care is better care. But a two-year study of Kaiser group-visit programs involving 790 patients provides support for the approach. The report found that while the number of hospital visits among group- and private-appointment patients was about the same, those participating in groups spent fewer days in the hospital. They also rated their quality of life higher than patients seeing the doctor privately.

Some of that well-being may stem from the realization that others in a group have more serious complaints. "You recognize