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David S. Gorelick: Glimpse of real health-care reform on Aquidneck Island

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By DAVID S. GORELICK

As Congress works its way toward a final version of national health-insurance reform, Rhode Islanders need look no further than Aquidneck Medical Associates for a glimpse into the future of health at the local level.

Recognizing that the current system of patient care is unsustainable and unaffordable, our 10 primary-care physicians, with offices in Newport and Portsmouth, have formed a unique partnership with Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island to begin implementing a new model of patient care called a patient-centered medical home (PCMH).

PCMH is an innovative care model that replaces the reactive, episodic care often practiced today with pro-active, coordinated care designed to improve patients' health and moderate long-term health-care costs.

Under the current, fragmented health-care system, a typical patient may see six or more different doctors or specialists a year for various illnesses or concerns. However, the different doctors that a patient is seeing may not know if, or how, the patient is being treated elsewhere. Because no single professional has a complete view of a patient's medical history, that patient may undergo unnecessary doctors' visits or repeat testing, or be prescribed conflicting combinations of medications.

A PCMH offers patients an ongoing relationship with a primary-care physician (PCP) who leads a team of other health-care professionals in taking collective responsibility for improving that patient's health.

Under this team approach, a nurse case manager typically assists the PCP with the coordination of care, including reminding patients to take medication and get required testing, as well as educating patients about their condition.

Depending upon the needs of each patient, the team may also include a behavioral-health specialist to help the patient deal with the emotional or other behavioral aspects of an illness, or a nutritionist to assist with weight or cholesterol management. Every aspect of that patient's care is coordinated by his or her PCP.

PCMHs also typically take full advantage of technology to further enhance patient care, implementing electronic health records (EHRs) to ensure that each member of a care team has a complete picture of a

patient's medical history.

Seeking to continuously improve the health of our patients, Aquidneck Medical Associates has been collaborating with BCBSRI for the last several years to reform our practice's health-care-delivery systems. With partial support from their Quality Counts program, we implemented EHRs in our practice four years ago to help improve access to patient data and reporting. In 2007, we added an on-site nurse case manager to see if it would improve patient care — it did! And we spent much of last year working closely with the health insurer in developing our new PCMH model.

Thanks to the support and collaboration of BCBSRI this year, about 300 of our complex BCBSRI members will be offered the opportunity to be treated under our innovative new PCMH model. Longer term, we look forward to working with BCBSRI to roll out the PCMH model across our entire patient base.

The health insurer is also offering PCMH practices pay-for-performance compensation for achieving specific quality-of-care performance targets related to improving both processes and outcomes. To achieve the goals of this program, our practice's diabetic patients, for instance, would not only have to get all of their tests done in a timely fashion, but must also show that they are achieving good control of their condition.

BCBSRI believes that changing the way that they work with physicians and their patients will let them not only provide their members with better care, but will also improve their health, and subsequently help moderate long-term health-care costs. Here at Aquidneck Medical Associates, we agree. We believe our new PCMH model will let us provide better care for our patients and improve their patient experience.

Regardless of what happens with health-care reform at the federal level, we're convinced that the greatest opportunity to truly reform health care is at the local level, and we believe that our new PCMH model will do just that.

David S. Gorelick, M.D., is an internist at Aquidneck Medical Associates and is the practice's patient-centered medical home "physician champion."