

From Mountains to the Valley: MedExpress expanding, revolutionizing health care

A former emergency room doctor is trying to fill a glaring hole in health system.

Story by Michael Hupp

SOUTH CHARLESTON -- One West Virginia doctor's vision has turned into a thriving urgent care business, helping fill the gap in health care delivery between the emergency room and primary physician offices.



Dr. Frank Alderman, president and CEO of MedExpress, is a former emergency room doctor who saw a glaring hole in the health care system. Too often he would tend to a patient who suffered a stroke, heart attack or severe trauma and then move on to the next patient, who was frustrated because he had waited for hours for a doctor to look at his sore throat.

"I saw first hand as an emergency room physician people that needed attention in ER's were not always in critical need but rather just needed urgent care," Alderman said.

Alderman said the clutter of urgent versus critical care patients who visit emergency rooms drives up costs and waiting times for patients. Alderman estimates that eliminating unnecessary ER visits would save \$30 billion to \$40 billion annually.

He said the average cost difference between an ER visit and urgent care visit is \$373.

The average national wait time to make an appointment with a primary care physician exceeds 20 days, according to a 2009 Merritt Hawkins study.

The average ER visit lasts 222 minutes, according to a 2006 Press Ganey Associates study. In West Virginia, the average wait time lasts 193.3 minutes.

After mulling the figures, Alderman decided to alleviate the burden on patients. He opened the first MedExpress in Morgantown in 2001.

MedExpress has grown to 40 clinics nationwide, including eight in West Virginia -- Beckley, Bridgeport, Charleston, Huntington, Morgantown, Parkersburg, South Charleston, Wheeling -- with two more opening soon. The most recent opened Oct. 21 in South Charleston.

MedExpress has seen more than million patients nationwide and more than 500,000 in West Virginia, according to a company release.

"Demand for alternative health care delivery models with the patient as the central focus is what is driving our growth," Alderman said. "Patients are demanding (and they should) access to affordable, convenient, health care that aims to exceed their expectations."



Alderman said for too long, schedules have centered on physicians and others instead of patients. He said that is why MedExpress is open seven days a week, and a physician is always available.

"When you offer access and great care at a reasonable price, patients are blown away and really appreciate this approach," Alderman said. "This model can truly help health care reform succeed."

Part of the company's model is always having at least a physician, a registered nurse and an X-ray technician at the facility. Most of the company's facilities also have a physician's assistant, nurse practitioner and a medical assistant, depending on demand, said Forrest Weyner, the South Charleston center manager.

In addition to urgent care, Weyner said MedExpress provides occupational medicine, workers' compensation treatments, vaccinations, screenings and physicals while cutting costs and saving patients time.

"We provide a multitude of services that may take weeks to get accomplished by a primary care physician and may be doubled in cost," Weyner said.

The staff agreed with Alderman that the company's goals may revolutionize the health care system.

"We do fill a niche that primary care physicians or an ER cannot provide, allowing someone who feels bad to come in at lunch, get the care and treatment they need and are back to work, continuing their day," Weyner said.

Dr. Greg Burnette, who worked in emergency rooms for more than 20 years, agreed.

"We can take care of (patients) faster and cheaper, within most cases an hour," Burnette said. "The patients are a lot nicer, too, when they have not had to wait for more than an hour to be seen."

As the company expands, so does Alderman's excitement.

He said patients have access to convenient and affordable care, and their employers appreciate access and affordability with a focus on communication and limiting lost time.