

Tennessean.

Apr 22, 2015

Michael Burcham Tackles Lack of Healthcare Quarterback

Alex Tolbert

Who quarterbacks your health care? In other words, when you're facing a hard decision related to your health, who do you call? Dr. Google?

The amount of time you've thought about this question is probably directly related to your health status. If you're pretty healthy, maybe you've never considered it. If you have multiple issues that cause you to have to see a cardiologist, an endocrinologist and a neurologist on top of your primary care provider — well, it may be one you think about a lot.

Why is that? Many times the drugs or other treatments prescribed by the cardiologist who is focused on the patient's heart conflicts with what the endocrinologist wants the patient to do based on her attention to the patient's kidneys. If the two specialists aren't talking to each other — and often they are not — someone else has to help the patient make the ultimate call.

Historically, it would have been the primary care physician. This is the doctor who knew the patient best. Not just the results of their lab tests, but their families and values, as well.

But the fee-for-service business model no longer affords these doctors the time to take on the quarterback role for their patients. This often leaves health care consumers feeling like they are on their own.

Michael Burcham, 2014's [Tennessean of the Year](#), Owen business school professor and successful health care entrepreneur, recently stepped down from his post as CEO of the [Entrepreneur Center](#). His next venture, [Narus Health](#), may just address this challenge for health care consumers.

What happens after a serious diagnosis?

Many of us have been there. A loved one faces a serious health care issue. The specialist comes in to explain the situation. You've never met her before, and while her compassion for the situation is clear, it is also obvious that she has many more patients she needs to see.

Then, there are the other specialists. Ideally, all of the patient's specialists would know what the others are doing, but they often do not.

Narus Health sums the problem up on its website with the following:

Patients with significant illnesses will see as many as 10 specialty physicians, undergo a number of diagnostic tests and struggle to maintain contact with their primary care physician. The scariest time also becomes the most confusing time. Lack of coordination among various practitioners further complicates the situation, creating a feeling of uncertainty.

On top of the ambiguity, the lack of coordination can lead to suboptimal decisions that negatively impact the patient's care.

Can we restore the primary care relationship?

Many would say the answer is to restore the primary care relationship. Pay primary care doctors differently so that they do not need to see so many patients every day. This would allow them the time to serve as the patient's quarterback when serious illness strikes.

And some primary care providers are choosing this path. They are building subscription-based business models known as "direct primary care." Instead of staying within the fee-for-service business model, they are opting out and charging their patients a fixed monthly fee for unlimited care. Often this unlimited care can include coordinating all of the different specialists and assisting as quarterback when illness strikes.

Direct primary care practices, however, are few and far between. Nashville, for example, only has a few of them. And besides, even the physicians in these models could use help when it comes to understanding all of the treatment options and coordinating on behalf of their patients.

Narus Health has identified the problem, and the opportunity to address it. It will be exciting to see what Michael Burcham and his team do. Many expect that Burcham, who has been teaching at Owen for years, will disprove again the adage that "those who can't do, teach." Health care consumers would sure be better off for it.