

Sick leave

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Quick Care Clinic in Burlington keeps patients moving by taking cash only and a single point of contact – the doctor.

We're taking less care of ourselves and as with many other things, the bad economy takes a lot of the blame. As people lose jobs, they also lose health insurance and the consequence is fewer doctor's visits, fewer prescriptions filled and poorer eating habits.

But some things can't be ignored and the attentions of a trained medical practitioner are often necessary. What do those without health insurance do? Fortunately these days there are a few options – both in the walk-in clinics that are popping up in grocery stores and drug stores and free-standing clinics.

Bread, Milk, Throat Culture

Clinics in stores started appearing in this region some five years ago or so, fueled largely by those who couldn't afford to see their general practitioner. But these clinics also make getting medical attention easier. Instead of making two stops – one to pick up milk and one to see the doctor – both can be accomplished in the same place.

Dr. Edwin Stickle is the primary doctor at First Stop Clinic at the Haggen store in Ferndale. Convenience is the main reason consumers stop by, he said, "because if you can afford to shop at Haggen, you can probably afford health insurance."

In fact, two-thirds of his patients have health insurance, so the convenience, the short wait, and the one-stop (literal) shop, are all attractive. Many patients are also new to the area, Stickle pointed out, and have not yet found a general practitioner.

He said the future of the clinic is dependent on getting more patients. "The pay for our employees comes from our patients so it all cascades through the system," he explained. "You need a denser population and there are probably not enough people in Whatcom County; in Seattle it's probably better."

The clinic did get busy for a while when it ran a sign on the main road in front of Haggen. But the city of

Ferndale forced the clinic to remove it. Stickle wasn't daunted by the setback and gets out regularly to market the clinic through word of mouth. Lately he's been targeting casinos and assisted living facilities. First Stop Clinic opened in December 2008, and business varies. "There are busy days and days when no one seems to be sick," said Stickle. "Business is the same as a year ago and we thought there might be a change (given the economy) since so much of our business is cash."

But, he added, his impression is that people in this part of the country are getting hit with layoffs six months later than other parts of the United States.

Patients tend to visit the clinic with routine problems – broken ankles, urinary tract infections, pneumonia – although there are many people with diabetes. Many patients come from Birch Bay and others work for the border patrol. Tourists and truck drivers also stop by for common problems. Stickle said he sees more people during the summer months: "People are out and about more [where they can get hurt], while in the winter they stay at home."

The cost of a clinic visit is \$55, far below the full-cost of visiting a doctor's office, which typically runs \$120 to \$130, Stickle pointed out. However, \$55 covers only the basics; someone coming in with three problems will have a higher cost, as does something like stitches.

The Doctor Is In

Not all clinics are in stores. Quick Care Clinic is located on Burlington Boulevard in Burlington, where it has operated since last May.

"We see anything under the sun," said family practitioner Dr. Robyn Choffel, who has different prices depending on what patients require. A basic visit runs \$45; urine and sore throat tests cost \$15; and for more serious problems such as depression, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes, an initial visit costs \$70, with subsequent visits priced at \$55.

Patients visit the clinic for simple problems like a sore throat, an ear infection or a rash, and there are more adult patients than children. "Kids get sick more but there are more services for them like DSHS," said Choffel. She hopes to be a DSHS provider by June, and expects the number of child patients to increase at that point.

"People have higher deductibles or no insurance so they don't go to the doctor at all," said Choffel. "And there are more people out of work and companies have really cut back on their insurance. So we don't see many people on Medicare because we can't accept that right now. Sometimes we see people who are train wrecks, who haven't been taking their medications."

Choffel not only prescribes medication, but she also advises her customers that many drugs are available for just \$4 at some stores such as Fred Meyer or Wal-Mart. Patients like Quick Care Clinic, she explained, because it's fast. They see just one person – the doctor; there's no nurse, no receptionist – so they move through quickly.

There are also no appointments, which she said patients like and waits tend to be no longer than 20 minutes at the most.

Choffel opened Quick Care Clinic originally in Sedro-Woolley but moved it to Burlington in order to increase patient volume. Her business has grown mostly by word-of-mouth, she said, but the location allows many people to see it as they drive past.

But what do doctors in traditional practices think of these clinics? Dr. Meg Sweeney, a family practitioner at Island Family Physicians in Anacortes, said she understands that the clinics are attractive to consumers since they offer low-cost, convenient and accessible care.

What she is concerned about is that they typically do not offer continuity of care. Family physicians



Robyn Choffel and Tiki Sego of Quick Care Clinic typically see patients for routine problems such as a sore throat or ear infections.

usually care for the health of their patients over many years – often from birth up – and this is unlikely to be the case with a clinic, she pointed out.

She also said that the in-store clinics are simply another way to draw customers into the stores to spend more money.

Careful Consumers

Is the move to clinics all part of a trend toward consumers taking charge of their healthcare costs?

Yes, according to Dr. David Lynch, former president of the Whatcom County Medical Society, a family doctor and medical director of the Family Care Network, a physician-owned practice with 12 locations in Whatcom County.

"What we've noticed is that people are becoming more careful about how they manage their healthcare," said Lynch. "Offices are less busy and people come in at a later stage of their troubles (because they are short of money). It's been a gradual change that we've noticed over the last two years."

Because of this, Lynch has been instrumental in developing Project Access, a partnership between the Whatcom County Medical Society and the Whatcom Alliance for Healthcare Access (WAHA) that donates needed care to low-income and uninsured consumers who do not qualify for other programs. Project Access is available to anyone, and Lynch is getting the word out through an outreach program. Project Access also finds needy people through medical offices and referrals from programs such as DSHS.

The program falls under the Whatcom Alliance for Healthcare Access, upon whose board Lynch sits. WAHA's services are available to all Whatcom County residents who need help finding insurance and healthcare. It provides counseling and help with insurance; access to Project Access; and a helpline with trained volunteers who educate, assist and advocate for consumers about their rights and options regarding health insurance and healthcare access.

Lynch set up Project Access about three years ago. "We have a problem with people not having access to certain types of care, especially primary care," he said, "so we decided to try and look at what the barriers were."

These, he said, were:

- Education.
- Consumers being unaware that something is available to help them.
- Consumers not being able to afford what is available to them.

While he's proud of what Project Access does, Lynch said that it's not a solution to consumers' inability to pay for healthcare.

"Unfortunately these are not things that can take us to the future but are more of a stop gap," he pointed out.

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