



ST. LUKE'S
FAMILY PRACTICE

WE MAKE HOUSE CALLS: St. Luke's Family Practice Finds New Life in Old Models of Care

by Kimberly Horg

Primary medical care—and the bills that come with it—is one of the hallmarks of modern life. But what do you do when you can't afford the often prohibitive costs of modern medicine?

For many people, a chronic illness or an unexpected accident can leave them wondering how to pay for medical bills or worse, doing without follow-up or preventative treatment because of the potential price tag. Here in Stanislaus County, one medical office is taking a stand against the status quo and focusing on patient-centric care that doctors provided in generations past. This office is St. Luke's Family Practice (SLFP) in Modesto. St. Luke's opened its doors in 2004 with a mission to help those who fall outside the normal range of medical insurance coverage. Its answer to the thorny problem of medical insurance is simple: St. Luke's operates outside of the typical medical-business model.

St. Luke's serves two types of patients: Benefactors—who happily pay a yearly premium for personal high-touch care from the founding physicians—and Recipients—patients who may not be able to afford the medical care they need and are served free of charge by St. Luke's staff. Benefactors are individuals and families who support the work of St. Luke's and receive dedicated primary care from either Dr. Robert Forester or Dr. R.J. Heck, the two working physicians who founded the medical office together.

"With the development of corporate-style medicine, increasing insurance premiums and increasing awareness of preventative health care, many patients seek an enduring patient-physician relationship. That is the foundation of our direct-primary care model," Karin Hennings, SLFP Executive Director, said.

St. Luke's offers a style of care reminiscent of that seen in the "old days" including house calls and 30-minute office visits during which the doctors offer an unprecedented amount of personal attention and even walk patients to the door.

Today, St. Luke's has 570 benefactors that choose from either Forester or Heck as their primary care physician. The membership of the Benefactors provides for the facility's annual operating budget, with private and corporate donors and community organizations such as Omega Nu and Soroptomist International of Ceres contributing funds for additional uninsured care.

And for those who need to see a doctor but don't have access, St. Luke's is a dream come true.

These patients, which SLFP's call Recipients, are individuals who cannot obtain health insurance and don't qualify for government programs. Hennings says in 2012, St. Luke's gave away over 4,200 visits and helped 1,653 individuals in medical need. The majority of the people who come to St. Luke's for help have one or more chronic diseases including diabetes, hypertension and depression.

SLFP is proud to have provided over 19,000 free health care visits to these recipients in Stanislaus County since it opened its doors in 2004. Recipients are thrilled to get primary medical care without charges from St. Luke's.

"Every day we help real people access health care. There is such a sense of gratitude from our patients," Hennings said.

SLFP's goal is simply to help everyone get access to the health care they need. To this end, St. Luke's has developed community partners (Quest Labs, Stanislaus Surgical Hospital Precision Imaging and Stanislaus Vision) who help provide other diagnostic services to the uninsured in the community.

Many of the people the practice sees are the working poor who have jobs but do not have insurance and/or exceed the income limits for government programs. St. Luke's asks patients seeking care to apply at the Stanislaus County Health Services Agency once a year for a state or federal health care programs including Medi-Cal or the Medical Indigent Adult program. The county office will either qualify an individual to receive health care or issue a denial letter after which the patient can get free outpatient visits at St. Luke's. "In many ways this is the safety-net FOR the safety-net!" said Hennings.

The office takes both its name and mission from the apostle Luke, the patron saint of physicians—and while the physicians and staff are bonded by their strong Catholic faith—patients of every creed, race and religion are welcome and encouraged to benefit from the office.

Francisca Salazar of Modesto has been a patient with St. Luke's since 2009. She suffers from severe chronic asthma and was previously without access to medical care. "I don't know what I would have done without St. Luke's," she said. "I was always sick and couldn't get help without money to pay for it. St. Luke's Family Practice is a true blessing."

St. Luke's Board of Directors includes nine community members that support the office's mission by lending their professional experience in the form of oversight and guidance for the nonprofit. The office also has a volunteer program that paves the way for doctors in residency and mid-level providers including nurse practitioners and physician's assistants to gain real world experience helping patients.

"We continue to be well-blessed out of this idea that nobody, including us, was certain would work in the long-term," Dr. Heck said.

Future plans include recruiting a third doctor to the Modesto practice and providing the model to like-minded physicians in other communities.

All financial support directly helps the uninsured by providing additional visits. Private donations and grants help pay for medical equipment and hiring additional medical help to see more uninsured patients. Contributions of any size are always appreciated.

Interested in learning more about St. Luke's Family Practice contact Hennings at 209.846.7916 or email khennings@stlukesfp.org. CH

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