

HEALTH

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MAKING HOUSE CALLS

Concierge medicine comes to the Interior

Service provides in-home physician care for a fee

By Jeff Richardson
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The era of doctors making house calls may not be as distant as most people believe.

An emerging health-care approach called concierge medicine is growing in the U.S., in which doctors come to homes and businesses to provide on-site medical care. Those who provide the service say it's both a way to add convenience and offer a more thorough level of care for their patients. For the benefit, patients pay a monthly fee to a doctor with a limited client load.

Dr. Michael Fitch, a family doctor at Chief Andrew Isaac Health Center in Fairbanks, plans to offer that model of service in Fairbanks starting Feb. 15. He believes his will be the first concierge medicine service offered in Alaska.

Fitch said he's attracted to the model as an alternative to the fast-paced world of traditional medical practices. Meeting a smaller number of people in their homes — he plans to cap the number of patients at 375 — provides an opportunity for a more comprehensive, intimate level of care, he said.

"As physicians, we find ourselves on this conveyor belt of seeing a patient, getting another patient in," Fitch said. "That's one thing, in the traditional sense, that physicians lose."

It's hard to accurately mark growth in the service, according to Concierge Medicine Today, an online trade publication. But the new site figures growth of 10-15 percent occurred between 2012 and 2013, with about



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5,500 concierge and private-pay medical practices in the U.S.

Fitch, who grew up in rural North Carolina before moving to Alaska in 2008, said it's a concept that he's always been intrigued by. People in small towns or isolated areas, such as those often found in Alaska, often have more limited access to medical care, he said. He decided this year that he was ready to make the shift.

The service has developed a reputation as a service for the wealthy, and the list of the top four cities providing the service — Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York and Palm Beach, Fla. — don't do much to dispel that.

Concierge Medicine Today said that only represents a small portion of the industry, with the share of patients paying for the "elite type of celebrity care" less

than 3 percent.

Fitch is offering four different packages for care, starting at \$60. He said the service isn't meant to replace insurance, unlike some concierge medicine plans for high-end clients, and isn't part of a health maintenance organization that limits care to a single physician.

He believes there are a variety of patients who could benefit from the approach — elderly, shut-ins and young professionals who don't take the time to see a doctor.

He said people with relatively small illnesses sometimes don't find it convenient enough to see a doctor, allowing those problems to grow into larger ones. In other cases, illnesses actually contribute to keeping people at home.

"People are sometimes just

not well enough to go to a doctor, as crazy as that sounds," Fitch said.

Few people in Fairbanks are familiar with the concierge medicine model, and Fitch has spent more than a month making presentations at businesses, churches and assisted-living facilities in the area. He said the feedback has been encouraging.

"The response has been very favorable," Fitch said. "Everyone loves the idea of a physician coming to them. Many people have said this is like the good ol' days and that someone values their time to come and see them."

Details are available through Fitch's website, www.ConciergeMedicineOfAlaska.com.

Contact staff writer Jeff Richardson at 459-7518. Follow him on Twitter: @FDNMBusiness.

HEALTH • FACT

Lack of sleep can cause several health problems. Though missing sleep to catch up on work or other activities can be tempting, the sleep loss often causes more harm to overall efficiency than any good it does.

Sleep deprivation has been a documented cause in many disasters in recent decades, including the Exxon Valdez oil spill.

IN BRIEF

Alaska Health Fair seeks healthy recipes

The Alaska Health Fair organization is seeking healthy recipe submissions from Alaskans to compile in a healthy cookbook.

Alaska Health Fair is a nonprofit organization that operates health fairs in communities all around the state to educate people on the importance of living healthfully.

The organization said it has received a number of recipe submissions but still needs more to complete the project.

To send a recipe to Alaska Health Fair remember to include your name and email it to ahfaa@gci.net or mail a physical copy to Alaska Health Fair, Inc., 720 W. 58th Ave. Unit J, Anchorage, AK 99518.

State waives flu shot fees into new year

ANCHORAGE — State health officials say they'll waive the administrative fee for the flu vaccine for certain Alaskans in an effort to get more people immunized.

The health department, in a release, says state-supplied flu vaccine is available for free for those under the age of three. Older individuals can qualify, too, if they meet certain requirements, such as having no insurance or having an insurance plan that doesn't cover vaccines.

The department says those who qualify have always been able to get the shot for free but were required to pay the administrative fee. That \$28 fee is being waived through March at all state public health centers and the Anchorage Public Health Center.

Alaska has recorded more than 240 lab-confirmed cases of the flu.

Staff and wire reports

Historic smoking report marks 50th anniversary

By Mike Stobbe
AP MEDICAL WRITER

ATLANTA — Fifty years ago, ashtrays seemed to be on every table and desk. Athletes and even Fred Flintstone endorsed cigarettes in TV commercials. Smoke hung in the air in restaurants, offices and airplane cabins. More than 42 percent of U.S. adults smoked, and there was a good chance your doctor was among them.

The turning point came on Jan. 11, 1964. It was on that Saturday morning that U.S. Surgeon General Luther Terry released an emphatic and authoritative report that said smoking causes illness and death — and the government should do something about it.

In the decades that followed, warning labels were put on cigarette packs, cigarette commercials were banned, taxes were raised and new restrictions were placed on where people could light up.

"It was the beginning," said Kenneth Warner, a University of Michigan public health professor who is a leading authority on smoking and health.

It was not the end. While the U.S. smoking rate has fallen by more than half to 18 percent, that still translates to more than 43 million smokers. Smoking is still far and away the



In this April 14, 1994, photo, heads of the nation's largest cigarette companies are sworn in before a hearing of a House Energy subcommittee which was holding hearings on the contents of cigarettes on Capitol Hill in Washington. More than 40 states brought lawsuits demanding compensation for the costs of treating smoking-related illnesses. Big Tobacco settled in 1998 by agreeing to pay about \$200 billion and curtail marketing of cigarettes to youths. From left are Robert Sprinkle III, executive vice president for Research American Tobacco Co.; Donald Johnston, American Tobacco; Thomas Sandefur Jr., Brown and Williamson Tobacco Corp.; Edward Horrigan Jr., Liggett Group Inc.; Andrews Tisch, Lorillard Tobacco Co.; Joseph Taddeo, U.S. Tobacco Co.; James Johnston, RJ Reynolds; and William Campbell, Phillip Morris USA. ASSOCIATED PRESS FILE PHOTO

leading preventable cause of death in the U.S. Some experts predict large numbers of Americans will puff away

for decades to come.

Nevertheless, the Terry report has been called one of the most import-

ant documents in U.S. public health history, and on its 50th anniversary, officials are not only rolling out new anti-smoking campaigns but reflecting on what the nation did right that day.

The report's bottom-line message was hardly revolutionary. Since 1950, head-turning studies that found higher rates of lung cancer in heavy smokers had been appearing in medical journals. A widely read article in Reader's Digest in 1952, "Cancer by the Carton," contributed to the largest drop in cigarette consumption since the Depression. In 1954, the American Cancer Society announced that smokers had a higher cancer risk.

But the tobacco industry fought back. Manufacturers came out with cigarettes with filters that they claimed would trap toxins before they settled into smokers' lungs. And in 1954, they placed a full-page ad in hundreds of newspapers in which they argued that research linking their products and cancer was inconclusive.

It was a brilliant counter-offensive that left physicians and the public unsure how dangerous smoking really was. Cigarette sales rebounded.

In 1957 and 1959, Surgeon General Leroy Burney issued statements that heavy smoking causes lung cancer. But they had little impact.

Amid pressure from health advocates, President John F. Kennedy's surgeon general, Dr. Luther Terry, announced in 1962 that he was convening an expert panel to examine all the evidence and issue a comprehensive, debate-settling report. To ensure the panel was unimpeachable, he let the tobacco industry veto any proposed members it regarded as biased.

Surveys indicated a third to a half of all physicians smoked tobacco products at the time, and the committee reflected the culture: Half its 10 members were smokers, who puffed away during committee meetings. Terry himself was a cigarette smoker.

Dr. Eugene Guthrie, an assistant surgeon general, helped persuade Terry to kick the habit a few months before the press conference releasing the report.

"I told him, 'You gotta quit that. I think you can get away with a pipe — if you don't do it openly.' He said, 'You gotta be kidding!' I said, 'No, I'm not. It just wouldn't do. If you smoke any cigarettes, you better do it in a closet.'" Guthrie recalled in a recent interview with The Associated Press.

The press conference was held on a Saturday partly out of concern about its effect on the stock market. About 200 reporters attended.

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