



## Concierge Health Care: Worth the Hefty Price Tag?

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Long waits for a quick five-minute appointment are pretty much the norm when visiting most primary-care doctors these days. If you're willing to pay extra each year, concierge health care will give near-immediate access to your doctor, longer visits and comprehensive care that goes beyond treating your illness. But is it worth the extra cost?

The idea behind concierge health care is to provide patients with preferred access to their existing doctor, as well as give them a higher level of care to prevent sickness instead of reacting to it. Additionally, most of the programs offer services that typically aren't covered by traditional health insurance. But the personalized attention and care doesn't come cheap: Patients pay doctors anywhere from \$1,500 to \$25,000 a year.

"It's a completely new approach to health care. [It] helps you stay healthy, which is just as important as treating you after you become sick," says Mark Murrison, president marketing and innovation at MDVIP, a concierge health care company. "Just like you have a financial advisor to put together a plan to achieve your financial goals, a MDVIP doctor becomes a health advisor looking at your overall health and working with you to put plans in place in order help achieve your health goals."

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Concierge medicine, which is often referred to as "Cadillac health care," isn't available everywhere. According to a survey commissioned by a congressional agency, there were only 756 concierge medical doctors in the country last year, up from 146 in 2005.

Patients opting into these exclusive health care plans can choose to pay annually or quarterly. According to Matt Jacobson, chief executive officer of SignatureMD, the patients joining concierge health care programs run the gambit from the very wealthy to the middle class.

"We had a successful conversion in Clinton, Oklahoma – population 11,000 – where the median income is the in the low \$30,000s," he says.

Jacobson did point out that many of the residents shared a common characteristic: a tight affinity with their doctor and a concern about being as healthy as possible.

The dwindling number of primary care doctors is a driving force behind the idea of concierge health care. According to the concierge health care companies, doctors are currently treating 30 to 35 patients a day, spending less than eight minutes with each patient and overworked and underpaid. Many times, a nurse or physician assistant will meet with a patient instead of the doctor.

"There is so much downward pressure on earnings that doctors are retiring in record numbers," says Jacobson. "By 2020 there will be a physician shortage and if you don't establish a more formalized relationship with your doctor you might not have access to them anymore."

With concierge health care, patients don't have to wait weeks to schedule an appointment or endure long waits and get to spend more time with their actual doctor (some plans block off a minimum of 30 minutes) as well as 24-hour hour access to their doctor via telephone and e-mail. Patients also get advance screenings to prevent things like heart failure or diabetes. Standard doctor visits – if you have the flu or need a checkup – are billed to your insurance provider.

### Is it Worth the Extra Cost?

Some argue that if you eat healthy, exercise and take care of yourself it's not necessary to pay extra for a wellness plans, but Jacobson of SignatureMD says the program has saved lives because doctors are able to do screens that normal insurance wouldn't cover.

Experts say if you are on a fixed income, paying extra each year for concierge health care isn't going to make sense; however, if you have disposable income, it could be advantageous.

"It works well only for those who can offer concierge medicine services," says Jason Hwang, executive director of the Innosight

Institute, a research firm focused on health care in an e-mail. "While concierge medicine offers a way out for current practioners, it is not a viable solution for creating affordable, convenient care for the entire country."

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