

## How much is your health worth to the bottomline?

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It doesn't matter who you are or how important your health is to your company. With a physician shortage as severe as the one in Ottawa, the hard fact is, without a family doctor, the only option are waiting two hours or more for an over-worked walk-in clinic physician who might only allow one health inquiry per visit, or going to emergency.

A report released by the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario late last month revealed only 4.1 per cent of doctors in eastern Ontario are accepting new patients. This can be a scary situation for those who transfer to the Ottawa region.

It is no surprise that private industry has stepped up to fill the void for those willing to pay the price.

Ronald Bannerman, 61, knows the price is worth it from personal experience. As the vice-president of corporate affairs at MD Management, the financial membership services subsidiary of the Canadian Medical Association, he signed on when his firm introduced the ExecHealth program for senior management personnel last summer. ExecHealth is an Ottawa-based private clinic which serves as a one-stop shop for preventive care.

"I took advantage of that (program) in October and went to the ExecHealth offices for the full assessment. As part of that assessment, I did a treadmill stress test with an ECG (electrocardiogram) and the consulting physicians noticed an abnormality," said Mr. Bannerman, who added he "felt fine" before the assessment. "So we pursued that through a cardiologist and discovered that I had a very serious blockage in one of my main arteries."

Shortly after, Mr. Bannerman was at the University of Ottawa Heart Institute, received an angiogram and eventually underwent open-heart surgery. "I was able to avoid having a major heart attack, which was just pending. Fortunately for me, we were able to address it," he said.

The major blockage was missed by Mr. Bannerman's regular physician, which is not uncommon, according to Dr. Lisa Moore, who has her own practice and looks after ExecHealth patients about half a day per month.

"When a patient comes to see me (as a regular physician), I am driven by their complaint. If a patient doesn't have a specific complaint, a doctor could easily miss things," she said.

"At ExecHealth, we have the time to ask questions. I don't often have an hour to sit down with a patient. I'm one of those people who could have missed something in one of my patients. It's not because I'm a bad family doctor, it's just that there is only so much time that you have."

The \$1,295 half-day assessments are designed for early detection and prevention of diseases such as cancer and heart disease by a team of medical doctors, nutritionists, nurses, physiotherapists and fitness experts. Clients are provided with a written health report which includes meal planning and personal training sessions.

President of ExecHealth Inc., Sanjay Shah said the services offered by ExecHealth since 2005 are not new, just new to the Ottawa area.

"Our model has been around for decades. But in the past, Ottawa has been too small to have a clinic like this. There are national law firms here who have this benefit for their partners, but the Ottawa-based partners couldn't take advantage of it because they have to travel to Toronto or Montreal to get it," Mr. Shah explained.

"From a risk-management perspective, it makes sense. Mr. Bannerman has over 30 years of information about that company in his head and we want to make sure that these people are performing at their peak."

Private clinics can raise the ire of those who claim they are opening the doors to a two-tier health system in Canada, where the rich get to jump ahead of the poor for health services.

Copeman Healthcare Inc. planned to open clinics in Ottawa, London and Toronto in 2006, but was challenged by the Ontario Health Coalition. In that case, the clinics planned to bill Ontario Health Insurance (OHIP) in addition to charging patients an "initiation fee" of \$1,200 plus a \$2,300 annual fee for health services similar to those offered by regular walk-in clinics.

Mr. Shah said ExecHealth is completely privately funded and provides services not offered by OHIP.

"Essentially what the Canada Health Act says is that you can't charge for anything that is already paid for by the government. It's very important to distinguish that we do preventive care, which is different from what family doctors do," Mr. Shah said.

He explained how regular family doctors can be paid as little as \$17 per visit, and since the government only compensates doctors for one issue per visit, doctors can insist on treating one ailment at a time "These people are running a business. They need to see a certain number of patients per hour. There is a time pressure and we have taken that time constraint out," Mr. Shah said.

Colleen Flood, Canada research chair in health law and policy for the faculty of law at the University of Toronto, admits where there is demand for services not provided by the public system, there will be supply, but that does not mean that Canada has a two-tier healthcare system.

"We don't have a two-tier system as I would describe them from around the world," Ms. Flood said. "If we have decided that these fancy, all-over body checkups are not going to be publicly funded because these fall into the realm of cosmetic surgery or fertility treatments, then we can't get upset that some people are going to get them and some people aren't."

She said the real problem lies with Canada's chronic doctor shortage. "The problem really is who provides those services? We don't have an adequate number of doctors and nurses. That means the doctors who choose to work at these clinics will be spending less time working in the public system."

One of the services ExecHealth provides is the ability to find regular publicly funded family physicians for customers when only four per cent of doctors are accepting new patients in the Ottawa region. Mr. Shah explained that this service has nothing to do with paying in order to jump the queue.

"We do the leg work. We keep abreast of who is setting up a new practice and who is accepting new patients so we know it when it isn't public knowledge, and then they are full in two weeks. We have our feelers out there," he said. But he admitted sometimes even he has been at a loss to find these doctors.

"We must pay more attention to this problem and how to ensure a robust and excellent standard of care in the public system, and then beyond that let others top themselves up in the private sector," Ms. Flood said.