A Relationship Worth Preserving: Do Not Let the Health Care System Come Between Us

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Recent surveys show that thirty-three percent of North American adults ages 18 to 34 do not have a primary care physician.[1] Another poll conducted in the United States in 2019 found forty-five percent individuals ages 18 to 29 had no primary care physician.[2] This trend among young adults may result in unforeseen consequences for future health concerns. This population and others who choose not to establish a relationship with a primary care physician can lead to missed opportunities in the realm of prevention. Much can be said about the doctor-patient relationship, especially as it applies to one's family physician. How can the value of someone who *knows* you be quantified? Considerations including continuity and coordination of care have innate value. Several studies support a range of objective benefits which are derived from increasing the number primary care physicians practicing in an area. These investigations range from county level comparisons to international findings. Overall, the following observations have been noted:

Having a primary care physician nearby saves lives!

Several studies have been conducted which show increasing the supply and concentration of primary care physicians saves lives. Most recently, a 2018 JAMA study showed that an increase of 10 primary care physicians for a population of 100,000 was correlated with an increase in life expectancy of 51 days.[3] A 2005 literature review, points out that an increase of one primary care physician for a population of 10,000 led to a 6 percent decrease in the population's overall mortality rate.[4,5] Similarly, decreased availability of primary care physicians is linked to higher mortality rates across a diverse group of populations—even in areas that have a robust supply of specialists.

Primary care physicians find cancer earlier!

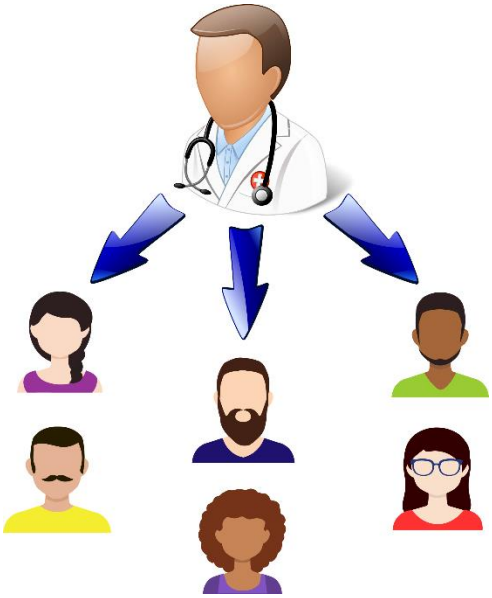
Melanoma is one type of skin cancer that may be recognized by a primary care physician at an early stage.[5,6] Screening occurs at regular clinical intervals and abnormalities may be noted on routine exams, allowing for recognition of atypical features while still in the initial asymptomatic phase. The introduction of dermatoscopy in primary care settings facilitates evaluation of suspicious lesions via another modality which enhances early detection, biopsy, and identification of aggressive and indolent skin cancers.

Additionally, family physicians have higher odds of identifying colon cancer and breast cancer in their early stages. This is accomplished by encouraging, recommending, and educating selected populations about availability of routine screening evaluations. Individuals with attributes which are considered high risk can also be identified and screened at a younger age when appropriate.[6] It has been suggested that treatment of comorbid conditions which increase the likelihood of cancer development and management of comorbidities during cancer treatment

contribute to better outcomes. Last but not least, it is typically the family physician who shoulders the responsibility in being the supportive voice for healthy lifestyle habits—including smoking cessation and weight loss. The health benefits of smoking cessation are numerous. Discontinuing tobacco use contributes to a reduction in the incidence of cancer and as well as improved cardiovascular health. Weight loss has been shown to decrease the incidence of endometrial cancer and various other malignancies. The longitudinal relationship which a patient develops with their primary care physician constitutes the ideal avenue to provide this important aspect of care.

Primary care physicians send you to the right place at the right time!

Family physicians have a broad scope of practice and can evaluate complaints with a wide differential in mind. They are required to confront diverse pathologies, incorporate interdisciplinary knowledge, and coordinate interspecialist care—all of which enhances their diagnostic savvy. Primary care physicians can help to prevent unnecessary specialist visits as well. In fact, specialist performance has been shown to improve when they receive referrals from primary care physicians instead of self-referrals.[7] This is accomplished through an in-depth evaluation in the primary care setting, elimination of minor illnesses which resolve with minimal or no intervention, or initiation of a work-up which necessitates the need for a specialist. At times, a primary care physician may perform all the care required with specialist consultation thus avoiding the need for specialist visits and adding efficiency to healthcare delivery.



For all these reasons and more, primary care physicians save money!

By decreasing mortality, increasing early detection of cancer, and providing thoughtful referrals—family physicians can save money, time, and resources. Family physicians also facilitate cost savings by performing procedures in less expensive environments. The comprehensive nature of primary care leads to decreased hospitalizations and fewer emergency department visits which are orders of magnitude more costly than visiting a primary care clinic.

This is a vital relationship to foster!

It has been postulated that young adults are increasingly reliant on urgent care, telemedicine, and opportunities for self-treatment. The convenience of these options is alluring, yet it seems to come with a cost. Establishing a relationship with a primary care physician can empower and inform care in an increasingly convoluted healthcare system. It’s a relationship that can provide protection, not only from malicious pathologies but also from excessive testing and unnecessary costs. Overall, the return on a relationship with a primary care physician is evident in the many forms of prevention it promotes.

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