

Road to Reform

Health-care providers cook up new ways toward wellness

Part Five in an occasional series about the local impact of national health-care reform.



Lankenau Hospital

Lankenau Hospital dietitians removed the deep fryer from the cafeteria last month.

Forget about buying deep-fried French fries or chicken fingers at any of Main Line Health's hospitals.

And those signs popping up at a few area shopping malls encouraging customers to park far from the entrances because "the walk will do your heart good"? You can thank Main Line Health for those, too.

It's all part of the health system's attempt to find different ways to promote wellness among its employees and patients.

"This whole thing got started a number of months ago, maybe even a year ago, when we were thinking about health-care reform and how we need to do more, for more, with less," said **Jack Lynch**, president and CEO of Main Line Health.

Promoting wellness to lower health spending by keeping people out of hospitals is one of the hallmarks of the health-care reform measure signed into law last year by President Obama. Republican legislators are aiming to dismantle the reform law this year, and replace it with their own plan.

Main Line Health — the parent of [Lankenau](#), Bryn Mawr, Paoli, Riddle and Bryn Mawr Rehab hospitals — had already banned smoking on its campuses nearly two years ago. So, the health

system administration turned its attention to devising strategies for influencing its staff and wellness and disease prevention.

“One of the most symbolic things we had here [that promoted unhealthy behavior], was the deep fryers,” Lynch said. “You don’t have to be a rocket scientist to know fried food is not good for you, so we decided to eliminate the fryers.”

Lynch said the food service managers at first “looked at me like I had four heads,” when he informed them of the plan, but he said they have since embraced the action and are working hard to produce healthier baked alternatives of the popular fried menu choices — including baked French fries and chicken fingers.

Employees and visitors have expressed a mixed reaction.

“I’ve heard from people who applauded management’s decision to eliminate the fryers,” Lynch said, “but we’ve also had employees say that they should be allowed to eat whatever they want and that we are taking away their comfort food.”

Main Line also joined up with the Exton Square and Springfield malls to put up signs encouraging people to park farther away from the entrances so they could subject themselves to some exercise that they might not otherwise get.

“With health-care reform there’s been this heightened awareness that all [health-care providers] have a responsibility to do more than just care for people when they get sick,” Lynch said. “We’re also here to improve the health status of our communities. If we get fewer patients because our community is healthier, that’s better for our mission.”

Lynch is also hopeful the initiative will have tangible results as well. He believes improving the health of Main Line’s staff will lower the health system’s own health benefit expenses, and demonstrating the value of wellness programs will lead to health insurers and employers being willing to pay more for such services.

Main Line Health is not the only local health-care provider taking unusual steps to promote wellness.

Medical students have also showed their creativity.

Last fall, researchers published the results of a study that found barbershop-based health education programs designed to lower blood pressure among black men were effective. The report inspired a group of University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine students to forge a partnership called “Cut Hypertension” with three barbershops in West Philadelphia.

“The program is an outstanding example of medical students responding to a crucial health disparity in a way that can really impact these patients and the community,” said **Karen Hamilton**, assistant dean for Penn medical school’s Office for Diversity and Community Outreach.

The monthly program involves checking the blood pressure of customers waiting to get their hair cut, and educating the community of the significance of hypertension and ways to monitor and control it.

Kenji Taylor, a first-year medical student at Penn from Meadville, is taking over the leadership of the program this semester.

Taylor heard about, and participated in, the barbershop visits last year through his involvement in the Student National Medical Association — a student-run group focused on the needs and concerns of African-American and Latino medical students.

“There’s sort of a general lack of understanding about high blood pressure and hypertension,” he said. “It doesn’t become an issue for people until they start showing symptoms. They don’t understand there are simple lifestyle changes you can make to prevent it — eating fresh fruit and vegetables instead of foods high in saturated fats, being active for 30 minutes four times a week.”

Taylor said the barbers at the three West Philadelphia barbershops they visit are enthusiastic supporters of the program, and the customers are for the most part receptive to what the medical students have to say. “They are surprised somebody wants to take their blood pressure while they are waiting to get their hair cut, but most are more than happy to talk with us and shoot the breeze while they are waiting,” he said.

Cancer Treatment Centers of America’s Eastern Regional Medical Center in Northeast Philadelphia employs hair stylists, wig specialists and beauticians to promote personal wellness for both patients and caregivers. Like a growing number of hospitals in the region, it offers reiki and yoga through its mind-body medicine department. It even provides “laughter therapy,” which use the natural physiological process of laughter to help relieve physical or emotional stresses or discomfort.

CTCA’s most recent foray into the wellness arena was an initiative launched by nutritionist **Nicole Kemp**, who went to culinary school before becoming a registered dietitian. Kemp developed a color-coded system for the hospital cafeteria. The system uses the colors of a traffic light to help patients, caregivers and employees identify and choose healthier food selections. Each entrée and side dish is labeled with either a red light [for options with the lowest nutritional value], yellow light [for foods with good nutritional value] or green light [for the best healthy choices that are high in important nutrients].

Fitness continues to be a major component of hospital-based wellness programs, with many medical centers creating outside walking trails on their campuses.

[Phoenixville Hospital](#) in Chester County has a “Senior Circle” program for older members of its community. It has attracted more than 900 members. The program includes a walking group that meets twice a week. Not wanting to miss walks during the cold and snowy winter months, Senior Circle members currently get their exercise walking a 1.5 mile-route throughout the hospital.

The mission of the Senior Circle program, said **Pamela S. Leiby**, Phoenixville hospital's Senior Circle advisor and volunteer coordinator, is to promote health and wellness while providing members with a connection and a comfort level with the hospital and its services.

Wellness is a reoccurring theme throughout the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. Among the specific provisions included in the legislation are measures that: Require all restaurant chains with 20 more locations to this year display calorie counts on restaurant menus (something Philadelphia started requiring as of Jan. 1, 2010). Certain vending machines will also have to disclose calorie content. Allow employers, beginning in 2014, to increase financial incentives to participate in wellness programs, and reward or penalize employees — in the form of higher or lower health insurance premiums or deductibles — based on how they score on health-related tests. The tests are not defined, but employers are expected to include measures such as smoking status, weight, blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Mandate that the federal government, now through 2014, award grants to state and local governmental agencies and community-based organizations to implement, evaluate and disseminate evidence-based preventative health activities to reduce chronic disease rates; and Require health insurers to cover the entire cost of a variety of preventive health screenings and services (a provision enacted last year). Source: Patient protection and Affordable Care Act.