

HEALTHCARE ENTERPRISE: CareHere Reintroduces the Company Doctor



Ernie Clevenger

Operates 90 Clinics in 17 States

Everything old is new again.

That's more than a catchy phrase to Ernie Clevenger, president of Brentwood-based CareHere LLC, which was founded on a premise popular decades ago — the company doctor. Considering that 26.7 million work days and \$1.3 billion in earnings are lost by American companies annually because of worker illness, perhaps the era of the company doc has come again.

Clevenger launched CareHere in January 2004 with partner Ben Baker, and the company's first client was American Retirement Corp., now called Brookdale Senior Living. "At the time, they had a number of assisted living facilities, and the employee cost was the highest in Tampa and Phoenix," he said. That's where CareHere focused first; and in just over a year, the cost of healthcare for employees at those two locations dropped from American Retirement's highest to among the lowest one-third of all its facilities.

CareHere specializes in the operation of healthcare clinics either on a company's grounds or conveniently located within a community. Employees receive basic healthcare, wellness and healthy-living care, standard medications and management of chronic diseases at little or no charge. "The Institute of Medicine says 16 conditions account for 60 percent of America's cost, and they're all chronic. If you're going to impact the employer's overall cost, you'd better be able to provide chronic care," Clevenger stated.

Certainly, saving employers money is a top goal of CareHere, yet Clevenger said employees also benefit greatly with easily accessible, inexpensive and high-quality care. The clinics are staffed by both physicians and nurse practitioners, usually in a 50-50 mix. "I'm very keen on nurse practitioners," he said. "They are 60 percent of the cost of a doctor, and because of nursing school, they have more a holistic view of care. They are less likely to prescribe a med on the first visit. They're chattier, and they will engage the patient generally better than an MD." Yet, when it comes to managing more difficult, complex illnesses and their co-morbidities, physicians are required.

CareHere's second client was Sumner County in Tennessee, followed by Rutherford County. Today, CareHere operates six clinics scattered throughout Rutherford County for all the county's employees, including teachers, who particularly find the convenient care a welcome benefit. One clinic in the highly populated Blackman community sees 160 patients a week. "It cranks," Clevenger said.

CareHere operates 90 clinics in 17 states. Clients average about 1,700 employees with 90 employees being on the small client end and 5,000 the largest. CareHere has about 160 employees nationwide, plus about 200 doctors and nurse practitioners, many on contract.

Most physicians begin their CareHere work with just eight hours a week. "Every physician has asked for more time," Clevenger said. At the root of the popularity, he explained, providers are typically paid more than what they take home today in a traditional setting — plus there are no receivables, no paperwork, "no 1-800 mother may I" and just three patients an hour. One full-time and one-part CareHere employee recruits physicians, nurse practitioners and also pharmacists for clinics that operate more than a limited pharmacy component of 150-200 largely generic medications.

“As far as the systems are concerned, we could set up a clinic tomorrow in your back yard. The systems allow the patients to schedule their own appointments, and today 82 percent do. The remaining call our multilingual call center, and we will schedule the appointment for them wherever they work,” Clevenger explained.

Most clinics resemble any other primary care facility – with one exception. “The waiting room has only a chair or two because there’s no wait. You can arrive two or three minutes before a 9 a.m. appointment, you’ll be seen at 9 and you’re out at 9:20,” Clevenger explained. Most are 20-minute appointments, yet procedures such as a pap smear are blocked out for 45 minutes. A blood-pressure check or a medication refill is just 10 minutes.

CareHere has a national contract with LabCorp for it for all its laboratory work. A courier picks up blood, urine, tissue, saliva and hair samples, which are transported to one of five processing centers throughout the country. While cultures and pathology reports usually take longer, about 90 percent of lab results arrive electronically the next day. What’s more, patients have access electronically to the results, presented in an easy-to-read format.

In short, at a CareHere clinic, Clevenger said there’s no wait, no copay, no deductible, and if the patient needs a med, they walk out with it for free. Clevenger said he grasped the importance of what CareHere does when he spoke with a single mother, a cafeteria worker barely making ends meet. She hadn’t had a pap smear in 15 years for two reasons: no time and the \$20 copay. “I asked her if we started offering pap smears at the new clinic where she works, would she go. She replied, ‘I’ll be there,’” Clevenger recalled.

For one-in-five new CareHere patients, they haven’t seen a doctor in a decade. “That’s a huge statement,” Clevenger said. “This is not rocket science. This is just blocking and tackling. It’s removing the barriers to care.”