

Physicians see advantages for patients when making house calls

By Cliff Collins

Benneth A. Husted, DO, is not surprised to hear physicians say in a national survey that house calls improve care.

Husted, whose practice has been comprised exclusively of house calls since 1992, says her practice has continued to grow.

It now includes four physicians and a patient census of 850.

The national survey suggests that the house call, an important

part of medicine in a bygone era, is making something of a comeback.

The survey found that seven in 10 primary care physicians believe house calls improve patient care and result in fewer emergency-room visits and faster patient recuperation time and comfort.

Conducted by HouseMD Today in cooperation with the American Academy of Home Care Physicians, the recent survey was made of 7,000 primary care physicians in the New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and San Francisco metropolitan areas regarding their opinions and attitudes about medical house calls.

The survey comes at a time when the annual number of home and rest-home visits increased by 43 percent from 1998 to 2004, numbering more than 3.6 million, following an increase in Medicare's reimbursement rate for physicians.

Husted said she has been hearing that more doctors in the Portland area are doing occasional house calls more than they were 10 years ago.

"There is the experience of 700 doctors doing this," she said. "Some of us are making this work."

She was referring to the number of members of the American Academy of Home Care Physicians.

But she added, "Most physicians don't know how to integrate house calls into their practice."

According to the survey, only 1 percent of primary physicians in specialties such as family practice, general practice, internal medicine, geriatrics, pediatrics, palliative medicine and geriatric psychiatry presently conduct home visits with any regularity.

The academy said that would constitute seeing 25 or more patients in their homes weekly.

While 79 percent of doctors surveyed said they currently are not conducting home medical visits during a typical week, 41 percent say they do make house calls from time to time.

"We hope that Medicare policy and future legislation will support this effort," said C. Gresham Bayne, MD, immediate past

president of the academy, which currently is lobbying Congress to pass legislation supporting house calls, according to Husted.

She said it would offer two benefits: better care for patients as they age, and potential cost savings to Medicare.

The legislation also would include a built-in financial incentive for doctors, she said.

"If a physician or medical group could save a minimum of 5 percent [over the current costs], anything over and above that would be shared with the physician," she said.

"Without question, these physicians on the front lines believe that a return to house calls will improve patient care," said Bayne. "As such, they have a strong interest in finding solutions to time management and reimbursement issues that presently limit the number of doctors making house calls."

He added that three factors are driving the increased interest in physician house calls: an aging population, advances in portable medical technology and dissatis-

faction by many physicians with the cost and effectiveness of contemporary medical care.

As an example of their interest, the survey cited that 25 percent of the physicians planned on purchasing communication technologies such as handheld or pocket computers or cell phones in the next one to two years.

Other key findings concluded that:

-- 69 percent agree (compared to 8 percent who disagree) that house calls will result in fewer emergency room visits

-- 89 percent to 4 percent agree that it will increase patient comfort

-- 80 percent to 8 percent agree that it will lead to more direct patient care

Fifty-eight percent of the doctors surveyed are in private practice, and 57 percent have been practicing for more than 10 years.

The complete survey findings can be purchased at www.housemdtoday.com.

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