

Primary Care Moves to the Forefront

General practice. Family medicine. Primary care. No matter the term, the concept of coordinated, accessible care that covers a gamut of health care needs is taking center stage in both the NIS and US. As health care systems look toward cutting costs, boosting efficiency and improving the health of their residents, they are increasingly turning to primary care.

In L'viv, Ukraine, patients who were routinely referred to separate specialists to treat such common complaints as strep throat, ear infections or for vision tests, now are seen by family physicians trained to handle a wide spectrum of health problems. Family doctors now make 40 percent of the diagnoses previously made by specialists.

A new health care center in Krupitsa, Belarus is open extended hours for visits to family doctors, and offers a family planning program and increased responsibility for general practitioners. In response to a recent survey, two-thirds of the patients said their health care had been improved by the opening of the center, and the Minsk Oblast Health Administration now hopes to create 15 to 20 similar centers.

And at the George Washington University Health Plan in Washington, DC patients choose a primary care doctor for care ranging from treatment for the flu to routine gynecological exams to help in stopping smoking. For more serious health concerns, patients are referred to an array of specialists, from oncologists to ophthalmologists, housed in the same building or nearby.

For one Hungarian doctor, who has been a family practitioner for decades, forging a long-term relationship with patients is a paramount factor in primary care.

"When you're a family physician, it's the continuity, not just seeing a patient for four minutes but for 10 years, for 20 years. You go to their homes. You know what kind of language to use when you see their bookshelves," said Marianne Szatmari, MD, who also serves as personal adviser to the Hungarian Minister of Welfare and as a World Health Organization liaison officer.

This issue of *CommonHealth* explores how health care systems, from Kazakstan to Russia to the United States, are being reoriented toward primary care and measuring success through fewer hospital admissions, more preventive care and lower costs.