

D O C T O R

STEVEN KNOPE

BY DAVE CALIFANO

CONCIERGE MEDICINE: THE NEW HEALTHCARE PARADIGM

By any standard, the resumé of Steven Knope, M.D. is impressive: professional musician, Ivy League educated — twice over, author, Ironman triathlete, personal physician of UA basketball coach Lute Olsen and, maybe most notably, pioneer in the field of Concierge Medicine.

About a decade ago, Knope began a movement to give medicine a more personal face and return it to the days when doctors made house calls and patients were more than just file numbers. After trying to change the system for a decade, Knope came to the

conclusion that he was wasting his time, as, in the current system, “the financial drivers are too powerful.” So instead of trying to battle “the bad guys,” he decided to do his own thing. Thus began his career as a Concierge Medicine provider. “I’m happier, my patients are happier, and it’s working,” he says.

With Concierge Medicine still in its infancy, Knope set out to write a book to introduce the concept to the population. After finishing a manuscript two years ago, he linked up with Praeger Publishers and in April released the first book on the subject, *Concierge Medicine: A New System to Get the Best Healthcare*.



OVM: How does concierge medicine differ from the system most of us know?

SK: Concierge Medicine is nothing more than returning to the days when people paid the doctor directly for medical care and had a doctor who knew them, was available to them, and cared for them. It's only in the recent generation that we've become used to third party payers. The norm used to be that you would pay the doctor his fee and that was the end of it. The problem with the third party system is that all of a sudden the doctor becomes the unwilling advocate for the HMO and the financial interest of the shareholders of

the company, as opposed to the advocate for the patient. Is Concierge Medicine the answer to the healthcare crisis and insurance crisis? No, it is not and it never was meant to be. It's a return to private medicine, although it has a slightly different structure in that people pay a retainer fee.

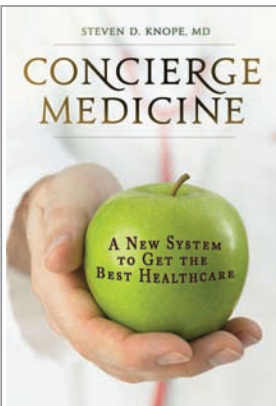
Concierge Medicine is a return to the days when people paid the doctor directly... I have some patients that have no insurance and pay me nothing.

OVM: The idea of a retainer fee for medical care has some detractors saying that this is an elitist form of medicine. What do you say to them?

SK: It's just simply saying that as a trained professional, I need to be compensated for what I do to do it well. I take folks that can't afford my \$6,000 dollar a year [retainer fee]. I have some patients that have no insurance and pay me nothing, and I have some patients who want to pay me \$5 or in chickens. Most concierge doctors that I talk to, if they pulled out a number, they see 10 to 15 percent of their patients free of charge.

Doctors sign contracts with HMO's all the time agreeing to ration healthcare, and they agree to be a financial advocate to the shareholders and the HMO every time they sign one of those contracts in exchange for more patients. I would argue that it is intrinsically unethical as opposed to saying to someone, "This is what I charge, I am your advocate."

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CONCIERGE MEDICINE: A NEW SYSTEM TO GET THE BEST HEALTHCARE (PRAEGER PUBLISHERS, \$34.95), THE FIRST BOOK ON THE SUBJECT, CAN BE ORDERED DIRECT FROM THE PUBLISHER AT GREENWOOD.COM OR FROM MAJOR BOOK SELLERS EVERYWHERE.

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OVM: What can a patient expect from you?

SK: Preventative care is a huge part of [my practice.] I have a gym in my office, two personal trainers, and people get an exercise and a fitness consultation. You really need three components to have optimal healthcare: For one, you need a doctor when you get sick. Second, you need to exercise. And third, you need to eat well. And if you do those three things, you're done. [Patients] are encouraged to become healthier and not see me just when they're sick.

I'm really passionate about the whole health promotion issue. Wellness is really a human performance issue. I was an overweight kid, I was a fat kid, and I just learned from my own experience that if you get out of that trap and become fit and strong, your life is instantly better. If you are physically fit and strong, you will feel well, and no matter how many supplements and herbs you take, if you are overweight and out of shape you are not going to feel well. I really like to help people tap into that physical strength and I think it really helps transform people of all ages.

OVM: So how do you stay healthy?

SK: I have a personal trainer who kicks my butt twice a week, and I do martial arts. I'm clearly an exercise addict; it's the only healthy addiction I know.

OVM: I understand you were a musician. How did you go from music to medicine?

SK: I was a professional French horn player. I went to the Mannes College of New York conservatory. I freelanced in NY for three years; played in Venezuela and Europe. I was making about \$17,000 at 24 and thought, this is going to be really hard to raise a family on in New York City, so I just switched gears. I did my premed medical training at Columbia, and went to Cornell University Medical College. I haven't performed in about a decade, but I'll have to leave that open.

OVM: You recently published the first book on the subject, *Concierge Medicine: A New System To Get the Best Healthcare*. What were you trying to accomplish?

SK: What I really wanted was to open up an honest discussion in this election year about what's wrong with the medical system. We have a crisis of declining quality medical care, and I don't think the answer is a socialized medical system like Canada has. I don't think that if we have a single-payer system that that's going to solve the problem. I think what's going to solve the problem is making the profession exciting and rewarding so that the best and brightest people are willing to consider a career in internal medicine.

So the purpose of the book is to stir the pot and ask some questions and say — before everyone jumps onto this nationalized healthcare idea and thinks that this is the solution — let's talk about what's happened in Canada. Let's talk about the logic of that, and let's talk about this model of privatization of medicine, which a lot of doctors are switching to, and a lot of patients are very happy with. Instead of just saying in some abstract discussion that this is what's wrong with the system, I am saying let's return to private medicine.

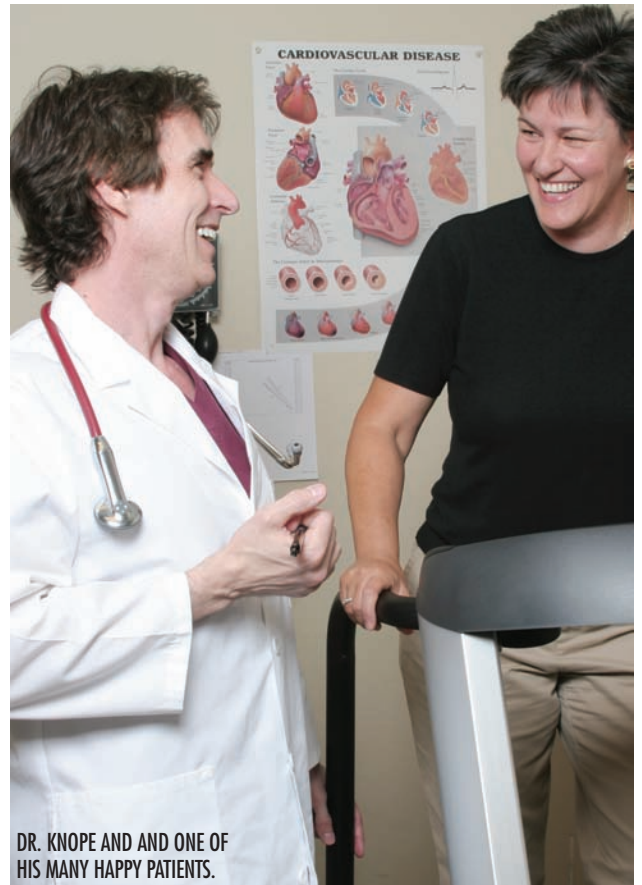
OVM: Why is private medicine so much better?

SK: Here's the problem: as medicine has become increasingly

more complex over the past 20 years, you need more time to deal with more complex medical issues. We have many more treatment options, many more diagnostic studies. As things get more complex, you need more time to deal with those complex issues, and ironically, in the third party payer system you have less and less time to deal with more complex issues, so it just doesn't work. You can't schedule eight minutes of quality time with your patients. Patients don't have time to talk to you — they go through a divorce or they're depressed, they have alcoholism or drug abuse or their wife just had an affair or whatever it is. You need time to sit and talk to people and build these relationships, you can't just pretend the time doesn't matter.

OVM: Do you see more patients making the switch to Concierge Medicine?

SK: I think there is going to be explosive growth over the next several years. There is this company MDVIP, which is franchised and at the leading edge of the growth. They make a really affordable product. I think their annual retainer fee is \$1,800 a year. This is now well within reach of the average middle class family. We have gone from about a half a dozen doctors who were talking about doing this when I started, to probably close to 1,000 practices with a hundreds of thousands of patients. As physicians see that this is possible and it's not professional suicide to actually take back their profession and learn a little about business and open their own shop, I think it will catch on. We are just starting to see the growth curve now. ■



DR. KNOPE AND ONE OF HIS MANY HAPPY PATIENTS.