

A new way to think about health care

By Heather J. Carlson
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Mayo Clinic has launched an ambitious experiment in Austin aimed at improving patient health by focusing on what goes on outside the doctor's office.

The three-year pilot project, spearheaded by the clinic's Center for Innovation, is focused on working with churches, schools, businesses and local governments to improve the health of Austin's residents. The idea is based on a concept known as "medical home," which emphasizes that doctors need to consider how the social environment where patients' live impacts their health.

"About 80 percent of health and outcomes relate to factors outside what you do in a doctor's office and hospital," said Dr. Doug



Wood

Wood, a Mayo Clinic cardiologist who leads the clinic's Center for Innovation.

Under this new care model, treatment for someone who

is obese could involve looking to see if they have access to biking and hiking paths or the local YMCA, making sure they are getting better advice about dieting and checking to see if fresh fruits and vegetables are available at the local grocery store.

As part of the project, Mayo Clinic has hosted several community meetings on the concept. So far, Dr. Wood said the Austin community has embraced the project.

"The enthusiasm of community leaders in those

meetings has really been remarkable. It has been quite exciting to see them start thinking about ways they can start doing things differently and sign up to help with several projects," he said.

So why Austin?

Wood said the city of 23,000 is relatively representative of communities across the United States, and it currently has only one hospital — the Mayo Clinic-owned Austin Medical Center.

There are also local businesses, such as Hormel Foods and Quality Pork Processors Inc., who have shown a willingness to partner on efforts in the past to boost employee health.

The hope is that if this project proves the new approach to care does more to improve people's health it could be replicated in other parts of the country.

The pilot got under way a year and half ago when the center dispatched a medical research team to study the community.

One of the early discoveries is how residents define being healthy. For a doctor, the answer would likely have something to do with the absence of disease.

But in the case of Austin citizens, it had more to do with their ability to care for their loved ones.

"You ask people what health means to them and it means they are able to do all the things they need to so the people who depend on them will be OK," Wood said.

Mower County Director of Community Health Services Margene Gunderson said that a major goal behind the pilot project is to make it easier for residents to get the support in the community they need to improve

their health.

"My hope here in Mower County is that we can actually create a greater link or a greater awareness among providers of resources in the community that people can use in maintaining their health," she said.

At this point, the pilot project is being funded entirely by Mayo Clinic. But Wood said the clinic is hoping to apply for some grant funding.

The new health care law creates a Center for Medicare Innovation, and the clinic is eager to collaborate with them on the project. That could potentially make available some federal funds for the Austin project.

To help determine whether or not the project is a success, researchers will look at the county health rankings to see if they improve.

Even if it is a success, as Wood expects it will be, there are still plenty of challenges to get this implemented nationwide. Perhaps the biggest obstacle centers on how health care providers are paid. The current system rewards volume of care — not quality of care.



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Encouraging residents to walk and run on Austin's trail system is a big part of a three-year "medical home" pilot project by Mayo Clinic's Center for Innovation. The concept emphasizes that doctors need to consider how their social environment impacts patients.

But Wood remains optimistic this pilot project can lead to a transformation in health care.

Ultimately, Wood said he

hopes that this pilot project will end up transforming how doctors think about providing health care.

"We're pretty optimistic

about the possibilities," he said. "We still have work to do and it's going to take us awhile, but we're hopeful and optimistic."

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