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Clinton doctor joins concierge medicine company

By [April Wilkerson](#)

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Dr. Robert Blakeburn. (Courtesy Photo)

CLINTON – Dr. Robert Blakeburn reached a point in his medical practice where a lack of time meant he was only treating patients for their current ailments without focusing much on their overall health.

That was simply unacceptable, he said, and not what he got into medicine to do. And with health care reform on its way to bringing him even more patients, but no extra resources, he said he knew it was time for a change.

“It was frustrating to have a patient with 10 medical problems and 15 medications, and I’ve only got 10 minutes with them,” Blakeburn said. “You just cannot do a good job that way.”

Blakeburn is transitioning his primary care practice in Clinton to concierge medicine. Patients who choose to participate will pay a yearly retainer for increased access to Blakeburn’s services – even house calls, if appropriate – and a heightened focus on their long-term health.

The shift is being made through SignatureMD, a California-based concierge medicine company that has its first Oklahoma client with Blakeburn. Company founder Matt Jacobson said his business model is different than concierge approaches of the past in which a physician simply dismissed hundreds of patients. His model crosses socioeconomic lines and allows for nurse practitioners to treat patients who don’t choose the concierge path.

“When you look at what concierge medicine was about five years ago, it had a business model that required the wholesale termination of 80 percent of a patient base,” Jacobson said. “Typically, a physician would sign up 400 to 500 patients and put 2,000 patients back into the system.

“For many of the physicians with whom we meet, they’ve gotten so fed up with the system that they’re contemplating retirement or taking a hospitalist position and terminating all 3,000 or 4,000 of their patients,” Jacobson said. “We’ve developed, essentially, a physician retention

mechanism. We're giving the physicians the ability to have intellectual satisfaction and a viable economic model that keeps them in the primary care system. It also keeps patients under care rather than pushing them out into the general health care system without a doctor."

The SignatureMD partnership also stands to boost Blakeburn's revenues, he said. Patients will pay an annual retainer to SignatureMD – \$1,500 a year if paid in total; \$1,600 if paid quarterly – and the company sends the majority of that back to Blakeburn. And Blakeburn pays no fee to SignatureMD as its client.

"It will help the bottom line," he said, "but it also gives me more security for the future knowing I can keep the doors open no matter what happens in health care."

The retainer fee is not for medical services – those will continue to be handled through the doctor's office or billed to insurance – but for access and quality of care, Jacobson said. Patients are guaranteed same-day or next-day appointments and, if they can't leave the house, Blakeburn will make a house call. Patients have his cell phone and access to a patient portal in which they can order prescription refills online, make appointments or look at their medical records. SignatureMD is already compliant with federal electronic health records requirements, Jacobson said, and brings that technology to its clients. It also offers genetic testing at half the price patients would pay elsewhere, he said.

But perhaps most importantly, patients get a bigger block of Blakeburn's time.

"If they need 20 minutes, they get 20 minutes. Or if they need an hour, they call in advance and say, 'I have a laundry list of issues; I need a full hour,'" Jacobson said. "This gives him the time to deliver whole-person, superb care with a focus on prevention."

Blakeburn said he previously had a private practice in Enid, then moved to Clinton to work as an emergency room physician. Eventually, he went back to private practice, but he increasingly noticed that he had less time to spend with patients. His patient load has averaged 25 to 30 people a day with another five people in the hospital at any time.

"When I was in the ER, a lot of time, I had more time with the patients than their doctors did, so I could find things the other doctors didn't see," Blakeburn said. "For me, a big part of this is how to take care of people, give them quality care, keep them out of the hospital, keep them healthy, or at least limit the medical issues they have. This will give me the time to do that."

Blakeburn said early reaction has been mostly positive, although a few people have reacted negatively. A SignatureMD staff member has been in Clinton meeting one-on-one with patients, and Blakeburn further explained his new focus at a community forum Tuesday night.

"This change is about access and quality, and a physician, that just tickles me," Blakeburn said. "It's very exciting as a physician to care for people the way they're supposed to be cared for."