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**Editorial note:** *We recognize that there are significant discussions and pending legislation to repeal and replace the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA). Unfortunately, it is too early to speculate about the impact that may result. At Novant Health, we are carefully watching, but we are not waiting. Our patients remain at the center of every decision and we are committed to our mission: to improve the health of our community, one person at a time.*

## Building a community of wellness

Blood pressure screenings, cholesterol checks, discounted mammograms, juvenile immunizations – these are just a few ways not-for-profit hospitals provide health benefits to the communities they serve.

Historically, hospitals focused their community benefit activities on providing charity care and other forms of uncompensated care to patients in the community. However, as hospitals began to shift toward a value-based model of care, community benefit requirements for nonprofit hospitals expanded. Today, health systems are addressing preventive care and population health improvement through a variety of activities and are designing ways to care for their communities outside of their walls. Many health systems are also inspired to collaborate with traditional and nontraditional community partners.

Community benefit includes programs or activities that provide treatment or promote health and healing as a response to identified community needs and meet at least one of the following objectives:

- Improve access to healthcare services.
- Enhance the health of the community.
- Advance medical or health knowledge.
- Relieve or reduce the burden on government to provide health services.

As a nonprofit healthcare system, Novant Health reaches across regions to improve the health of the communities we serve. Through our community benefit efforts in 2016, thousands of women in the North Carolina Triangle got screened for heart disease. Struggling coastal families received free baby care supplies at the Brunswick Community Baby Shower. Children at low-income schools got needed immunizations, and families

## Building a community of wellness continued

who struggle to pay for medical treatments received help paying for their healthcare. As a result, in 2016, Novant Health provided **more than \$725.5 million in community benefit**, up from \$706.3 million in 2015.

Novant Health is also working to address health disparities in the communities it serves by partnering with like-minded organizations. In Mecklenburg County, North Carolina, Novant Health is working closely with Carolinas HealthCare System and the Mecklenburg County Health Department to eliminate health disparities. The goal of the collaboration is to effectively pool efforts and resources, build upon existing work, and come together for the greater good of the community. Together the organizations are focused on increasing access to care; establishing resources for mental health and disease prevention; offering immunizations for all children; decreasing ER utilization; and helping people access healthcare at the right place, time and price. In the future, this collaboration may also include other nonprofit organizations, senior centers, the faith community, and parks and recreation departments, which will help enhance the health and well-being of all area residents.

Novant Health is not the only healthcare organization giving back. In San Francisco, **Saint Francis Memorial Hospital** is addressing poverty, violence, hunger, poor nutrition and lack of housing. Through its Tenderloin Health Improvement Partnership, Saint Francis Memorial Hospital is decreasing tooth decay in school-age children; reducing death rates associated with cardiovascular disease, lower respiratory infections, poisoning and drugs; and reducing gang-related violence during school hours.

**Ascension**, headquartered in St. Louis, provides free care to those in need in the 24 states that it serves, as well as implements practical solutions that minimize their organization's impact on the natural environment. Known as their **Environmental Stewardship Program**, hospitals within the Ascension network host weekly farmer's markets, fill their cafeterias with local meat and produce, use china dishes for patients and eliminated Styrofoam in their retail food service. The health system also employs green construction, operations and maintenance of its healthcare facilities, vehicles, landscaping and site water management, and educates the community about conservation efforts with signs throughout its hospitals. In 2017, Ascension's focus is on reducing the use of antimicrobials in architectural and furnishing products, improving waste management and mitigating climate change impacts.

Many of these programs qualify as community benefit. Those that do not are still a great benefit to the communities they serve and have an impact on human health. As a result, these community initiatives allow these healthcare systems the opportunity to build a community of wellness, which improves overall population health.

# Electronic health records can improve population health

Electronic health records (EHR) have been implemented in over 95 percent of hospitals, according to the Office of the National Coordinator of Health Information Technology.

As a result, many patients and healthcare providers have seen the benefits of the EHR and the importance of exchanging patient information among all healthcare systems. Interoperability, or the easy exchange of EHRs among healthcare systems, allows healthcare providers greater access to a patient's medical history, regardless of where and when a patient received care. This avoids redundancies in testing and exams, reduces costs and allows the healthcare provider to offer better quality and more individualized care. It also helps to improve population health.

Consider this scenario: A physician is performing an annual exam on a diabetic patient and notices that the patient's blood sugar levels have become unpredictable. The patient also mentions that his eyesight has begun to decline. Through the patient's EHR, the physician can see when the patient last received a diabetic eye screening, predict how long it will take to regain control of the patient's hemoglobin A1C, see trends among other patients with similar symptoms, and establish a care plan with follow-up reminders for the patient and physician to follow. If the patient visits other providers, they will see that -the patient is following a diabetes care plan and should administer care accordingly.

As a value-based network and accountable care organization, Nebraska Medicine, a two hospital system sees value in incorporating population health into its EHR. According to Healthcare IT News, its goal "is to help private practice physicians work more collaboratively across the state [of Nebraska] to improve care, reduce costs, benefit from group purchasing agreements and participate in new federal incentive programs."

At Novant Health, a broader approach to incorporating population health into the EHR is being applied. This allows other healthcare systems to access its patient information and vice versa.

In early 2017, Novant Health became the first health system in the United States to provide access to Epic's Healthy Planet Link module to allow care providers, both affiliated with and unaffiliated with Novant Health, to access key health trends for patients.

Healthy Planet link is an analytical tool that gives healthcare providers information about Novant Health's patients, such as historical prescription trends, the frequency of hospitalizations or preventive care measures. Over their lifetime, most people will see multiple providers, undergo a variety of screenings and experience health emergencies. It is important that healthcare providers within the Novant Health system and those practicing outside of our system have access to this valuable patient information so they can provide appropriate preventive care.

Epic's Healthy Planet Link is a tool with an associated dashboard that provides healthcare systems and providers with information that can help coordinate care delivery, monitor quality and cost, reduce financial risk, and engage patients through a centralized data warehouse. It also allows providers the opportunity to track performance on several utilization and preventive care quality metrics, which can assist in improving overall population health.

## **Electronic health records can improve population health** continued

Novant Health has identified 15 trackable measures. Those are:

- Screening for future falls
- Poor control of hemoglobin A1C
- Diabetes eye exam
- Use of imaging studies for low back pain
- Controlling high blood pressure
- Use of aspirin or another antithrombotic for ischemic vascular disease
- Depression remission over a 12-month period
- Breast cancer screening
- Colorectal screening
- Influenza immunization
- Pneumonia vaccine for older adults
- Body mass index, or BMI, screening and follow-up plan

# Addressing the opioid addiction

Over the past two decades, patients with pain disorders have been treated with alarmingly high amounts of opioids, resulting in unintentional overdoses and even deaths. Today, more people are dying from opioid overdose than from car accidents or gun homicides. In fact, in 2015, unintentional opioid poisonings took the lives of **998 North Carolinians**, a 900 percent increase since 1999.

People of all age ranges and socioeconomic status have been affected by opioid addiction. It is a devastating crisis, and hospital systems and community health associations are working together to address the issue.

In North Carolina, the state is working to address the epidemic by allocating funding from a two-year grant it received to fight opioid addiction. Made possible by the **21 Century Cures Act** passed in 2016, North Carolina will allocate 80 percent of the funds to recovery and treatment services.

Novant Health recognizes that opioid prescribing patterns must change and that patients who have opioid use disorder should be identified and treated. As a result, Novant Health is building a structure to develop and sustain processes for a holistic approach to opioid stewardship.

This three-year initiative will address the following areas:

- Appropriate prescribing of opioids for acute, post-surgical and chronic pain
- Use of multiple forms of pain therapies to reduce opioid prescribing and provide better pain relief
- Alternative pain therapy (massage, yoga, physical therapy)
- Identification and treatment of patients with opioid use disorder and/or addiction
- Transitioning patients from one care setting to another to ensure their pain and/or addiction needs are met

In Virginia, the state is addressing the opioid epidemic through a program called REVIVE, a multiagency effort to provide training in opioid abuse recognition and response. According to the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, there was an **increase of 1,578 percent** of prescription opioid deaths between 1999 and 2013 – and this number continues to rise.

In addition to providing training to the local law enforcement and community at large regarding how to respond to an opioid overdose emergency, Virginia has issued a statewide standing order for naloxone, a medication that reverses the effects that opioids have on the brain. Virginia residents can now request naloxone directly from the pharmacy without having to visit their doctor or medical provider.

Montgomery County in Ohio also recognized the need to address the opioid epidemic. They are planning the creation of a **one-stop crisis care center**. The goal is to reduce the burden on hospital emergency rooms and jails. The proposed crisis center will likely be a partnership involving the county and the area's largest hospital systems. The center will house people on a voluntary or involuntary basis for a short time to get them started with medication and counseling, as well as refer to additional services. In addition to this proposed center, Montgomery County currently offers community education, makes naloxone (a drug that reverses or blocks the side effects of opioid medications) available to those leaving jail, and connects individuals and their families with community resources.

The nonmedical use and abuse of prescription drugs are serious public health problems throughout the U.S. It will take healthcare systems, government agencies and community organizations to come together to identify innovative ways to address this epidemic. Without these partnerships, communities will be unable to effectively address patient safety and improve the health of our communities.

# Q&A with John Phipps, executive vice president of Novant Health and president of Novant Health Medical Group



*John Phipps, MD, is president of Novant Health Medical Group and executive vice president for Novant Health. He joined Novant Health in 1998 and has served as an endocrinologist at Forsyth Internal Medicine, Forsyth Endocrine Consultants, and currently at Novant Health Salem Family Medicine. He has held a number of leadership positions at Novant Health and has been medical group president since 2009.*

## **Q: How is Novant Health addressing community wellness?**

A: We are committed to wellness and disease prevention within the communities we serve. On the continuum of health, wellness is optimal. Promoting and creating wellness is our mission restated and there are many opportunities for us to make a positive impact.

One in three people have prediabetes. Obesity is prevalent and high blood pressure is a major health issue. Many people are either not aware that they have these issues or are not aware of what to do. To combat this, throughout the communities we serve, we offer education and free health screenings for prediabetes, high blood pressure and obesity.

People who have obesity, prediabetes or high blood pressure are at a greater risk for heart disease, stroke, diabetes and other chronic conditions. As these conditions are often linked, focusing on identifying patients with prediabetes or diabetes can help identify those with a chance to make different choices and to live healthier lives.

Last year alone, Novant Health provided over 6,000 individuals with free hemoglobin A1C tests, which measure the risk for diabetes by gauging average blood glucose levels over the past few months. We also offered diabetes education classes so that individuals could learn how to live a healthier lifestyle and to manage their diabetes at home. Lifestyle changes such as weight loss, increased physical activity, and following a healthy diet can substantially reduce the risk of developing type 2 diabetes and therefore reduce the risk of major health problems down the road. By attacking pre-diabetes, we are effectively addressing multiple health issues and fulfilling our mission to improve the health of our communities, one person at a time.

## **Q: Does Novant Health have a unique approach to caring for patients with chronic conditions?**

A: We are focused on patients with chronic conditions because they benefit greatly from our team-based approach to care and we can help them live happier lives, avoid adverse health outcomes and reduce their healthcare costs. One example is the use of care coordination, where clinical team members partner across the continuum of care to make sure our patients have the care they need. This includes a proactive approach to health screenings and health maintenance, monitoring prescription adherence, coordinating care across different venues, and identifying and focusing on those who have been in the emergency department or hospital. We offer education on chronic conditions and programs for weight loss, tobacco cessation and healthy eating.

Within our own team members and dependents, we have seen significant benefits from our approach, including fewer visits to the emergency department, fewer hospitalizations, dramatically reduced rate of readmission and a reduction in healthcare costs.

## Q&A with John Phipps continued

### **Q: How important is patient education in improving the community's overall healthcare quality and value?**

A: Low health literacy is still a major obstacle and is linked to poor health outcomes, medication nonadherence, increased healthcare costs and increased hospital readmissions. Five years ago, Novant Health amplified its efforts to improve health literacy and the results have been significant.

For example, Novant Health Presbyterian Medical Center improved patient understanding among heart failure patients of how to manage their condition, which resulted in a 44 percent reduction in readmission rates. The rate was directly correlated to increased patient knowledge.

We also consistently utilize the "Ask me 3" model to improve health literacy. The program encourages patients to understand the answers to three questions: What is my main problem? What do I need to do? Why is it important for me to do this? As a result, patients gain a better understanding of their care plan, are more satisfied with their overall level of care, and are less likely to be readmitted to the hospital.

One of the great challenges in patient education is in meeting our patients where they are and providing them information they need in a format they can understand. We need to be relentless in our efforts.

Caring for our people does not have to be accomplished through formal programs, however. Little things applied consistently over time can make a big difference, and our wellness programs help to identify those. I can't make your workday shorter or easier, but I can encourage you. If you have a tough patient, it's OK to take five minutes to regroup, take deep breaths, look out a window, or step outside and feel the sunshine on your face.

If our team members can see the value of being self-aware to their needs, adding little (and sometimes bigger) things that refuel them to their lives, we will transform this industry because we will have the energy to make the next change.

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