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New network of independent physicians to focus on value-based care

By Jenny Wagner

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A new clinically integrated network known as Partners Health Alliance is aiming to help New Jersey physicians stay independent, while increasing the quality of the care they deliver at lower costs.

In a clinically integrated network, physicians work with hospitals and other health care providers to better coordinate care for patients, making it more efficient and eliminating redundant or unnecessary services, said Richard Larison, CEO of Partners Health Alliance, which was announced last week.

“Think about a physician giving a patient a referral,” Larison said in an email. “That’s not very helpful when the patient has to go home, call the new physician they’re referred to, and set up a new appointment. Instead, why not have that referred physician sitting there in the appointment with the first physician? It makes it incredibly more convenient.”

The model also allows members to take advantage of value-based contracts with private insurance companies and government payers such as Horizon Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Jersey, Aetna and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. It’s a shift away from traditional payments for individual tests and services.

“This is where the health care industry as a whole is headed, and we are committed to advancing it within our state, especially for independent physicians and physician groups who need access to resources, but do not want to lose their identity and autonomy,” Larison said.

One of those physicians is Dr. John LaRatta of Berlin Family Practice, who has been in practice for 20 years, and with his Camden County office for close to 17 years.

As the only physician, he’s felt the pressure of balancing regulatory requirements and paperwork with providing quality care and prioritizing his patients.

“My concern as a health care provider deeper into the 21st century was to make sure I would have the infrastructure in place to provide the kind of care that I wanted to provide, and not at the expense of the doctor-patient relationship,” said LaRatta, an Evesham resident.

As part of Partners Health Alliance, LaRatta and other member physicians maintain their own practices, but they can get help with data analytics, technology and other administrative services.

Members are required to make commitments of time, accountability and compliance with certain clinical initiatives. They also must collaborate with other members.

That collaboration allows members to “cross pollinate” best practices, without forcing them into an employment relationship with a hospital or health system, Larison added.

“If someone in the network does X really well, and someone else has an extremely effective process for Y type of care, they share those practices with each other,” he said.

Members also have to meet value-based payment contract requirements, which broadly include improving quality of care, lowering cost, and enhancing patient experience. In other words, Partners Health Alliance receives a set amount of money per insurance or health plan member it serves, per month to keep them healthy.

If the physicians do it for less, they get to keep the savings.

“In order to keep receiving the (per member per month) payments, members have to show that they’re bending the cost and quality curve,” Larison said.

So far the new network, which is physician-owned and managed by East Brunswick-based Partners In Care United Medical Group and Freehold-based CentraState Healthcare Partners Physician Hospital Organization, includes more than 700 physicians, and officials hope to have 2,000 by the end of the year.