

To remain independent, Merrillville doctor joins physician ‘village’

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Dr. Chiedu Nchekwube wants to remain an independent physician.

However, with a national push to pay doctors based on quality rather than quantity of care, that is becoming harder to do.

So the Merrillville primary care provider joined a new company that helps doctors better manage the health of their patients.

“We’re not administrators,” he said. “We’re physicians.”

Chicago-based VillageMD handles the administrative side of so-called value-based care, freeing doctors to focus on treating patients. The company provides care coordination, data analytics and value-based contract management.

In recent years, the United States health care system has been slowly shifting from fee-for-service reimbursement to a model based on cost savings and quality. The Affordable Care Act helped accelerate this change, which is designed to reduce health care spending at a time when it accounts for nearly a fifth of the U.S. economy. Under the model, insurers pay providers a lump sum to manage large patient populations, which means the providers make money if they keep people well — and lose money if they don’t.

However, this is easier for large hospitals and physician groups, which have big administrative staffs and care teams to manage the new payment model.

“Independent physicians don’t have the resources to do these kinds of things,” Nchekwube said.

VillageMD uses data analytics to identify patients who are high risk or have fallen into a care gap. The company provides care coordinators, including in-office nurse managers, to follow up with patients who missed regular screenings or were just released from the hospital. These workers make sure patients are being compliant with medications and appointments, in the hopes of preventing readmissions.

The company also has health coaches, diabetes educators and resource coordinators, and negotiates and manages valued based-contracts that reward doctors based on patient outcomes.

“They’re providing you human resources and data and community outreach,” Nchekwube said.

VillageMD said its physician practices have been recognized by Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services for having lower-than-average hospital readmission rates, Medicare costs and commercial health care costs. Nchekwube is the first physician in VillageMD’s Northern Indiana market.