

Dr. Shekhar Challa – taking the pulse of healthcare

Shekhar Challa moved to Topeka more than 20 years ago and has become one of the area's top practitioners in the area of Gastroenterology. He co-founded Kansas Medical Clinic, a multi-specialty clinic with four locations, and founded Osteoporosis Services ten years ago. This practice is now the largest mobile bone density testing company in the Midwest, providing services to 140 rural hospitals in seven states. Dr. Challa is an award winning author, with his book titles including "Spurn the Burn" and "Winning the Hepatitis C Battle." He has and is currently serving on the boards of directors for several companies, including Amsurg-Nashville, the largest ambulatory surgery center company in the U.S., the Osteoporosis Division of Proctor & Gamble, MyMedicalRecords.com, and Caris.

As one of the area's top practicing physicians who also happens to have a number of business interest in and around the Topeka area, we decided to visit with Dr. Challa about the prognosis for healthcare in the Capital City.

TK: What is your vision for the future of health care in Topeka, including the impact of St. Francis new hospital on the former Menninger campus?

CHALLA: In my opinion, the physicians and hospitals in Topeka provide superb health care. We are lucky we do not have much managed care in Topeka (much of that credit deservedly goes to the Stormont Vail administration). We do not have any competing major health care centers or hundreds of miles to the west. My vision for Topeka is that patients from surrounding communities should have no reason to go to Kansas City for their healthcare needs and we should be able to meet all their needs in Topeka. We in the healthcare community should get into the mindset of competing against the Wichita's and Kansas City's and not spend time or energy competing amongst ourselves and, instead, think of the "big picture." St. Francis' decision to build a new hospital will definitely add value in meeting the needs of Topeka and surrounding communities.

TK: There has been much buzz around the possibility of moving the U.S. to a single-payer "nationalized" or "universal coverage" healthcare system, harking back to what was dubbed "Hillary-care" during the Clinton Administration. What do you think of this concept and do you think such a system would adequately address the healthcare problems in this country?

CHALLA: I agree we have a major problem with the health care system. We spend twice as much as other industrialized nations, like the UK and Canada, on health care per capita. We have around 15-20% of the population uninsured, while the actual number may be even more. Part of the problem with the current system is that bureaucracy and paperwork consume around 35% of the healthcare dollars spent today. Further, a significant portion of health care dollars are going to the insurance companies' bottom lines.

It is very clear that the health care system needs to be fixed but I am not sure the answer is "nationalized health care." NHC does come with its own set of problems as we have seen in other countries. I believe that the quality of "free health care" will deteriorate and the waiting period for tests, procedures, surgeries, physician visits, etc. will increase. For example, one in eight patients in Great Britain wait more than a year for treatment (we are not used to waiting).

Another detriment will be the decrease in access to advanced medical technology as the incentives provided by the free market are replaced by government red tape. Pharmaceutical companies will have no incentive to bring new drugs to market, and there will be no incentive to bring new drugs to market, and there will be no incentive for physicians, nurses, and other health care professionals to provide competitive care.

TK: What will become of charity care clinics like the Marian Clinic here in Topeka if the government provides universal coverage for everyone?

CHALLA: The idea that every Topekan will have health insurance is wishful thinking. Unfortunately I do not see all Topekans with health insurance in the near future and it sure is a blessing for our uninsured citizens that the Marian Clinic tries to fill that void. With the costs of health insurance increasing every year, I think we will actually see more uninsured or under-insured in the years to come.

TK: "Electronic Health Records," systems where the health records of patients are available electronically, are a major topic of discussion in the health care field today. Where are we on EHRs? Is Topeka ahead or behind?

CHALLA: Topeka is probably a little behind. I do believe we will go paperless in both hospitals and in physician owned practices in the next 5-7 years.

TK: What is new in the field of gastroenterology?

CHALLA: We are continuing to see major breakthroughs in Gastroenterology and we at Kansas Medical Clinic are proud to say we have introduced several procedures, tests, and technologies even before Kansas City Gastroenterologists. We are now able to see the entire small bowel with the PILLCAM, essentially a video-camera the size of a pill which you swallow and, in a few hours, takes 58,000 pictures of the small bowel.

TK: To what do you attribute your success?

CHALLA: You are only as good as the people you work with and surround yourselves with, and, of course, credit goes to my beautiful wife and daughters.