

SCOTTSDALE REPUBLIC

VP/GENERAL MANAGER:
Michael Ryan, 602-444-5810

OPINIONS EDITOR:
Robert Leger, 602-444-6805

OPINIONS WRITER:
Cindy Hernandez, 602-444-7748

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Agility needed to find health-care future

As the national health-reform debate took its twists and turns, Tom Sadvary remained consistent.

Health care needed to be more efficient and affordable, the Scottsdale Healthcare CEO said. Medical providers needed to be “nimble and agile.” New approaches to delivering care would be needed.

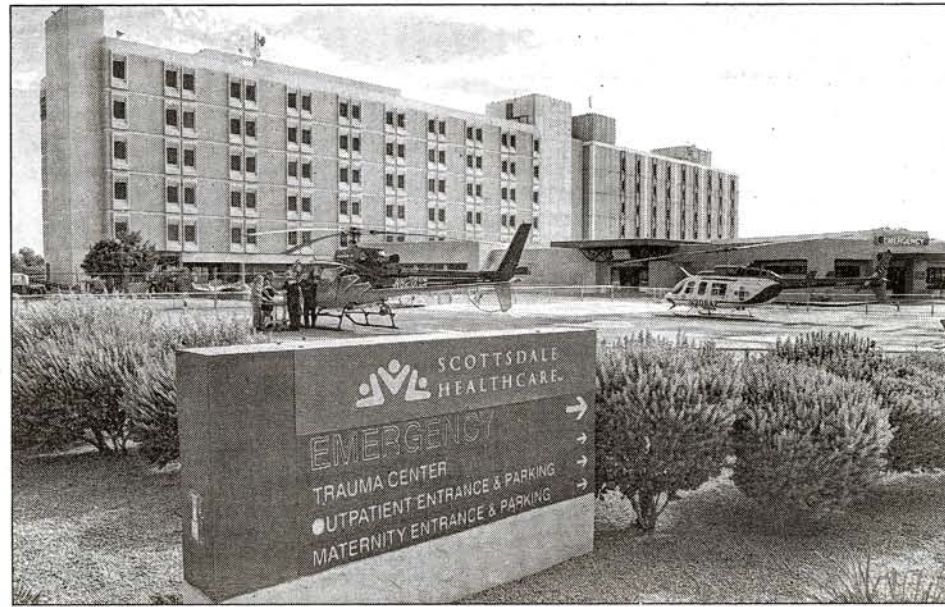
OUR VIEW

It was more than rhetoric. The hospital recently became the largest client of a startup, Stat Doctors, that hopes to divert people with less-urgent complaints from costly emergency rooms.

Stat Doctors makes virtual house calls. It’s among new online companies that use the Internet or phone to diagnose and prescribe medicine for such common conditions as bronchitis, urinary tract infections or sore throats.

A patient registers with the site to be “seen” at any time of day. An appointment is scheduled within 30 minutes. The doctor contacts the patient by video conferencing or phone.

The patient’s co-pay is less than one-fourth of what it would be at the emergency room. That — and avoiding the waiting room — are incentives to use the service.



CARLOS CHAVEZ/THE REPUBLIC

Scottsdale Healthcare recently became the largest client of Stat Doctors, which is meant to divert people with less-urgent complaints from costly emergency rooms.

The hospital gains by keeping people with non-emergencies out of the E.R. (Nationally, slightly more than half of emergency-room visits are not emergencies.) An employer gains by keeping health-care expenses down.

But it’s a new approach, and human

nature is skeptical of change, especially when our health is at stake.

Questions immediately leap to mind. Can high-quality health care really be delivered via Internet video? Can a doctor properly diagnose without using a stethoscope or looking down your

throat? How bad could the consequences be if a virtual visit misses something that would have been apparent if the doctor and patient were in the same room?

If the quality turns out to be close to what a personal visit provides, how significant are any cost savings for patient, employer and health-insurance company? Is this really a more efficient and affordable way of delivering medicine for this niche?

Such questions can be answered only through experience. That’s why Scottsdale Healthcare’s involvement is important. It has the right combination of skills. As a medical provider, it’s in a good position to measure the good outcomes of virtual doctor visits. As a big employer and a big business, it can collect a lot of data and measure financial outcomes as well.

This won’t be the last experiment it and other health providers will need to be involved in. Whether the federal health-care-reform law survives or not, the future of health care remains unsettled. Costs continue to escalate, which keeps up the pressure for more efficient and affordable delivery of care. Sadvary’s call for agility and nimbleness won’t soon fade. It’s good to see it being put into practice.