

# An Ounce of Prevention

Drs. Rochelle Schwartz, left and Dr. Sharla Lichtman of the Genesis Professional Group Inc.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE SOMERVILLE

*H*ow would you like to have your own personal physician with unlimited time for medical appointments and 24 hour-a-day availability? This physician would have an intimate knowledge of your health concerns and would work with a team of professionals to get you on the road to wellness.

Well, about 1-1/2 years ago, physicians Sharla Lichtman and Rochelle Schwartz created a personal health-care service offering exactly such a scenario.

After working together in a traditional Thornhill-based family practice for 10 years, they decided to change the way they practise medicine.

Both doctors are keen on professional development and noticed many of seminars and conferences they attended extolled the virtues of preventive medicine.

But, like most doctors, they had waiting rooms filled with sick patients and little time to devote to preventive measures, such as lifestyle counselling.

They began to explore different ways of practising medicine. The model of care used by Dr. Joan Charboneau, who now practises in Mississauga, particularly impressed them and she was more than happy to share her knowledge and expertise. Eventually, they came up with a unique approach to personalized health-care planning that they've called the Genesis Professional Group.

The switch has been challenging but also greatly rewarding.

"The greatest challenge in changing from a standard practice to Genesis has been teaching and educating prospective clients the value that preventive, holistic and comprehensive medicine has in helping to not only treat, but prevent disease," Dr. Schwartz said.

Dr. Lichtman had already been incorporating nutritional counselling and psychotherapy into her practice as a family physician but was seeing 30 to 40 people a day and found it difficult to offer the focus on a healthy lifestyle she believes necessary.

A recent study conducted by a group of doctors from Duke University Medical Center expresses the same concern.

In a media release, lead author Dr. Kimberly Yarnall, states, "Although we know that prevention is very important, it is simply not possible for family care doctors to deliver everything needed for preventive medicine, given the large number of patients they have."

The study found the average patient requires about 25 preventive medicine services that would take an estimated 7.4 hours out of a doctor's day.

The study concluded a team approach that included other health professionals is needed to provide total patient care.

Ontario citizens have also realized preventive health care is crucial.

Results of a health-care survey conducted by the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care showed the majority of respondents believe it is a priority to "develop leading-edge wellness programs to keep people healthy and take pressure off our hospitals and doctors' offices".

Initiatives such as Telehealth, a hotline that provides access to registered nurses 24-hours-a-day, offering free, confidential advice on any health matter, and HealthyOntario.com, a detailed website containing information on health and wellness, are a couple of ways the province is beginning to address the issue of preventive care.

Genesis Professional Services fits in with the current trend to promote healthy lifestyles. The concept is to provide comprehensive health services for patients in addition to those offered in a standard medical practice.

The first step is a three-hour consultation with the client, including a discussion of the individual's priorities and concerns. A priority for one individual could be the stress of being a working mother.

For another, it might be a weight problem or, for a third, a genetic

predisposition to a certain disease.

An extremely thorough family history is taken at this point and, together, doctor and client decide on which issues to focus.

Either Dr. Schwartz or Dr. Liftman is available to every Genesis client to act as their personal medical consultant.

This means after the initial assessment and workup, they take on the role of advocate and personal physician.

They are available to their clients 24-hours-a-day by pager and strive to help clients to traverse the health-care system maze. Patients can see them as often as necessary for as long as needed with no waiting time. The physicians are even willing to make house calls and make a point of stating all medically necessary services are covered by OHIP.

As far as they know, Genesis is the only such type of medical service in York Region.

The two doctors have put together a team of qualified specialists to address all aspects of the total person, including a nutritionist, lifestyle and stress management counsellor, fitness and exercise specialist, naturopath and a dietitian.

Extra services by the specialists, such as relationship counselling, personal fitness training, or behaviour modification programs, are available at an additional fee.

"We all work together to develop an ideal health-care plan for each patient," Dr. Lichtman said.

"I love having the opportunity to get to know my patients so well and to provide them with the best possible options for their particular situation," she adds.

Having more time to practise has also allowed partners to really go out of their way for their patients.

"I recently had to get an urgent MRI on a patient the day that all the hospitals shut down due to the SARS crisis," Dr. Lichtman said.

"I had to go through five different hospitals until I could get him one. I spoke to three neurologists and five radiologists. Three of the radiologists were on quarantine and one of the neurologists was a SARS suspect. It was a nightmare that day, but with persistence, I got the patient what he needed. I was ready to send him to Buffalo if I couldn't get it done here."

Indeed, it is hard to picture a doctor in a regular practice having the time to make that great an effort on the part of each patient.

There is a vast amount of research to

## Wellness Links

- For further information on the Genesis professional Group-Personal health planning, call 905-760-1415

- HealthyOntario.com – detailed health information on line

- Telehealth Ontario access to registered nurses 24 hours a day, seven days a week

- York Region's Health Connection provides a confidential line to health information and services at 1-800-361-5653

- HeartyParty.com – website of York Region health partners.

support the fact counselling patients to make healthy lifestyle changes will reduce the incidence of illness and disease for the general population.

However, doctor shortages and the fact OHIP only covers certain services have limited opportunities for doctors to practise in ways they know will be helpful.

York Region has taken the challenge of improving health care by developing programs that encourage healthy lifestyle behaviours.

For instance, Vaughan has an Active living committee, which is developing programs such as Live Active Days and the Alive Initiative, a communication tool for community services that will showcase those who are promoting wellness.

York Region has also created [heartyparty.com](http://heartyparty.com), a group of health partners dedicated to helping residents get the most out of life by eating well, exercising, avoiding smoking and reducing stress.

For Dr. Schwartz, it has been a great source of professional satisfaction to have lots of time to spend with her patients.

"I finally feel that I have the time to practise medicine preventively and pro-

actively as I take on an advocacy role for my patients."

"People nowadays, especially the baby boomers, realize that staying healthy and attending to their health is a priority. I believe that patients now want to take a more pro-active approach to staying healthy rather than just treating illness," she said.

The partners also emphasize healthy eating, stress reduction and exercise are three of the most important ways to ensure a healthy future.

The difference between Genesis and a typical doctor's office is evident as soon as one walks in the door. The atmosphere is plush and inviting. The room has a fireplace, book shelves, comfortable couches and a water fountain in the reception area. "Going to the doctor can be very stressful for some people," said Dr. Lichtman.

"We wanted to create a relaxing, warm and soothing environment to try to decrease their stress."

They call the area a lounge, rather than a waiting room, because they try not to keep people waiting. By booking 30 to 60 minutes for each regular visit, they can ensure that, generally, they aren't rushed or falling behind.

Their personal offices have chairs

around small tables so doctor and patient can speak at length in a relaxed atmosphere.

The annual \$2,500 fee pays for the comprehensive total health assessment and follow-up visits. The patient also receives a customized health plan, along with complete documentation of diagnostic data and a detailed interpretive report from each consultant that is packaged in a personal dossier.

After the personal health-care plan is received, a follow-up session is set up with the team to review the evaluation and address any concerns. The goal is to create a long-term relationship and flexible wellness plan that can be adapted as time goes on.

Dr. Lichtman said Genesis attracts clients who see their health as a top priority.

Dr. Schwartz believes all people would benefit from taking a pro-active approach to their health. She advises people who want to take charge of their health to become "a team member along side their family physician ... when it comes to treating health-care concerns".

"It is very important patients educate themselves about any of their illnesses or conditions and discuss them in great detail with their health-care providers."