

A Fresh Approach



The Golds take daily walks as part of the preventive care and wellness emphasis of the program.

When Stanley and Roberta (Bobbie) Gold's long-time Eisenhower family physician Lawrence Cone, MD passed away in 2009, they were in a quandary.

"We'd been seeing him for decades," says Bobbie. "He was a walking encyclopedia about our medical history, and gave his patients 100 percent-plus. We were at a loss to find a new primary care doctor who measured up."

But Bobbie persevered. Loyal to Eisenhower Medical Center, she began reviewing issues of Healthy Living magazine in search of a potential new doctor for herself and her husband.

"One afternoon, I read an article about Dr. Joseph Scherger, and I got positive vibes about him," Bobbie relates. "My husband felt just as positive. So, we scheduled an interview with him."

That interview lasted nearly an hour, during which Bobbie and Stan asked Dr. Scherger questions about his approach to patient care, and they discussed their goals and expectations of a relationship with a primary care physician (PCP).

"He gave us very thorough answers, and we were impressed, especially by his philosophy of making one-to-one communication with his patients a priority," recalls Bobbie. "Before we left his office, we decided that he'd be our doctor."

"The Golds were smart to realize the importance of having a primary care physician," says Dr. Scherger, who is based at the Eisenhower George and Julia Argyros Health Center in La Quinta. "Without someone who takes responsibility for all of you, your care is fragmented, since specialists take care of only one body part or organ system."

A few weeks after that interview, the Golds met with Dr. Scherger for complete physicals and to review their health records. At this appointment, they learned about the Eisenhower Primary Care 365 Program.

"This program is a new model of health care that offers an enhanced level of personalized service," explains Dr. Scherger. "In the traditional, office-based model of care, all care — except for emergencies — occurs during office visits. But with the Internet, we can offer a new platform for communication and care that's available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year," shares Dr. Scherger. "Through a secure online application called RelayHealth, patients can ask their doctor questions, request appointments, discuss their medications, obtain lab results, and keep us informed about how they're doing with weight loss or managing their blood pressure, for example. It's a communication link that makes our care more continuously available, and patients can take an active role in their care instead of being dependent on an office visit to share information."

"While a face-to-face appointment is available anytime the patient wants or needs it, the online communication enables us to use office visits more selectively," explains Dr. Scherger. "Plus, we can spend more time with patients when they do come in to see us," he adds, noting that appointments are regularly scheduled for 30 or 60 minutes. "Stan may have added five to ten years to his healthy life by making these lifestyle changes. He will be able to take fewer medications and be more active."
—explains Dr. Scherger

"Ours is a medical-home model of care," Dr. Scherger notes, referring to an emerging approach to comprehensive primary care that facilitates a real partnership between patient and physician. Patients pay a modest fee to participate in the Eisenhower 365 program — currently \$595 per member per year, with couple and family rates available — which allows participating physicians not only to provide care outside of office visits, but also to take on a more manageable number of patients (the typical PCP has 2,000 or more patients, while Eisenhower 365 primary care physicians have 900 or less patients). "Having a medical home means you have someone coordinating all your care, looking at all aspects of your health," Dr. Scherger adds.

The Golds were sold on the program. "You can communicate with your doctor via E-mail 365 days a year," Bobbie says. "If I send Dr. Scherger a question, he's back to me in less than 24 hours with an answer, and always advises us whether we can discuss something on the phone or need a face-to-face visit. There's no problem getting an appointment in a week or less. I don't know where else you can get that kind of service."

"You're given quality time at every visit, and he really takes the time to listen," she continues. "The communication and support are far superior to what I've ever experienced elsewhere."

Another aspect of the Eisenhower 365 program that appeals to the Golds is its emphasis on preventive care and wellness.

"Dr. Scherger is really focused on helping us do the right things to stay healthy," Bobbie says. "Stan has a terrible time with his weight, and Dr. Scherger is very kind and concerned, taking the time to explain things in a way that leaves us with a positive attitude and wanting to do what he advises. He's helped Stan reduce the number of medications he has to take."

"We eat healthy, lots of fish and fresh vegetables," shares Bobbie. "But, I have issues with cholesterol. Dr. Scherger researches different medication options and communicates with me all the time."

"As a start, Stan has lost 16 pounds," shares Dr. Scherger.

"Many of our patients are retirees like the Golds, and they want to enjoy life and stay healthy as long as possible," Dr. Scherger says. "We develop a health and wellness plan for each patient, looking at how to make our patients younger next year by making the right lifestyle changes to reduce their risk factors."

"Stan may have added five to ten years to his healthy life by making these lifestyle changes," explains Dr. Scherger. "He will be able to take fewer medications and be more active."

"We couldn't be happier," says Bobbie. "The cost is nominal. It's a wonderful program, and an amazing value."

"Eisenhower's motto is 'health care as it should be,'" Dr. Scherger adds. "We believe that the 365 program is primary care as it should be."
For more information, visit emc.org and select the Eisenhower Primary care 365 Program link.