

Opinion: Barton proactively pursues health of the South Shore

By John Williams

The New Year has always been the perfect time to reflect and look ahead with a fresh perspective. As the primary wellness provider for the South Lake Tahoe area, I would like to address questions you may have about the future of healthcare and what Barton Health has planned for 2012 and beyond.

With healthcare in flux, many of us have questions and are wondering: "How will healthcare reform affect us?" While a great deal of unknowns exists, I'd like to share what we do know and help you make educated, sound health decisions for the future.



John Williams

In March 2010, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care and Health Care Act (PPACA) and the Education Reconciliation Act of 2010 (amendment the PPACA Act) were signed by President Obama. This law serves as the primary basis for healthcare reform legislation of the 111th Congress.

Healthcare reform was designed to address three main issues:

- Increase access to healthcare

- Improve patient quality
- Reduce cost.

For hospitals that rely on patient insurance coverage, the reform bill is a double-edged sword. While there will be more insured patients, insurance is expected to pay the hospital at a lower rate for inpatient services. In return, outpatient care will grow as more of the uninsured will have access to more healthcare facilities, rather than being treated in the emergency department, which has guaranteed treatment for patients. These are just a few of the provisions and changes that will take place in the next four years. With this in mind, Barton continues to be proactive in seeking valuable services for the community and visitors. We are looking at 2012 optimistically, while pursuing the health status of our community by addressing wellness education patient access and improving care.

Looking ahead

As a proactive rural community healthcare provider, our priorities lie in addressing healthcare reform, enhancing our medical services and working collectively with community partners to help ensure the success of our economy. Barton Health's key focuses for 2012 include:

- Implementation of an electronic medical record system
- Conducting a Community Health Needs Assessment
- Securing the designation of a Level III trauma center
- Implementation and expansion of specialty services
- Innovation and recruitment.

Electronic medical records

To meet healthcare reform requirements, Barton will join other

facilities across the nation and implement an electronic medical record system. The Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC) will ensure safe and quality care for patients. The system will provide easy access to health information for caregivers including lab work, medications and X-rays and will enable a seamless transfer of patient medical records from one facility to another.

Quality measures

The success of a hospital is based on the care we provide and I am proud to state the quality-of-care we provide has improved significantly over the past few years. Under healthcare reform, all hospitals will be judged on the quality and the consistency of care they deliver through a program known as Value Based Purchasing.

The hospital value based purchasing program rewards hospitals for improving our patient's experience of care while reducing medical mistakes. Hospitals will be measured on patient experience and quality of care. With these scores, the federal government will take funds from the poor performing hospitals and reward the outstanding performers.

Hospitals will benefit if they have high scores and show improvement. Barton will continue to focus our efforts in this arena, benefitting our community with exemplary patient experience.

Community Health Needs Assessment

The Community Health Needs Assessment is not only a requirement of healthcare reform, but will identify the health issues that are in the greatest need of support on the South Shore. Barton plans to identify barriers to access for healthcare, preventative healthcare needs, modifiable health risks and quality-of-life issues. The goal is to obtain a quantifiable gauge of the overall health status of our community. We will be requesting input from the public and

will work alongside health experts in the area to identify issues and create programs to address the major needs within our community.

Expansion of services

Trauma Center: Barton Memorial Hospital, in conjunction with the region's emergency medical services response team, is working to establish Barton Memorial Hospital as a Level III trauma center by seeking approval from El Dorado County to begin operations by spring 2012, with official designation by spring 2013. This designation will improve the overall quality-of-care for trauma patients, allowing them to stay in the area for care rather than being transferred to another medical facility outside of the area.

Tahoe Center for Orthopedics: Barton Health is well on its way to creating an orthopedic center of excellence. Tahoe Center for Orthopedics is comprised of the area's leading orthopedic surgeons, nurses, sports medicine specialists and support staff, all designed to offer a first-rate patient experience like none other in the region. In 2011, we remodeled the private-patient-rooms at Barton Memorial Hospital, added a pre-operative education component, hired a nurse dedicated solely to the care of orthopedic surgical patients and added a home visit rehabilitation program. New for 2012, TCO will expand its orthopedic program, allowing patients to receive surgical and rehabilitation care the same day an injury occurs.

Innovation and recruitment

In 2011, our services expanded throughout the region with growth of specialty services, physicians and technology. We recruited a world-renowned physiatrist from the Mayo Clinic, a talented audiologist and introduced dedicated cardiac services. Telemedicine, a program allowing patients to remotely consult with physicians outside of the area, will

expand in 2012.

With grant funding through Access El Dorado, a countywide community collaborative, the program will provide telemedicine equipment to out-patient offices and assist in offering adult endocrinology, psychiatry (adult and child), cardiology, neurology, dermatology and infectious disease consults. Our telemedicine program has minimized the need for patients to leave the area for care while enhancing medical services in our community.

In addition to telemedicine and specialists, Barton continues to increase technology and procedures that rival our “big city” counterparts, such as the single-incision gall bladder surgery, incisionless reflux procedure, the HALO breast exam and colon hydrotherapy.

Meeting the needs of our region

Barton’s mission is simple – to support our residents regardless of their insurance coverage or ability to pay. With the unemployment rate in South Lake Tahoe at a 16.7 percent, Barton is committed to offering free to low-cost wellness programs and services.

Free wellness lectures, discounted flu shots and complimentary health screenings are among some of the vital services we offer.

Additionally, the Barton Community Clinic treats nearly 19,000 uninsured and underinsured patients each year and continues to grow. Helping Hands, our financial assistance program, is designed to relieve some of the burden of medical bills for residents who are eligible. Barton’s Community Advisory Committee has awarded nearly \$75,000 in grants since 2009, addressing oral and mental health, obesity, nutrition and physical fitness programs for both children and adults.

Growth and prosperity

Our goals are aggressive as we pursue improving the health status of our community – both economically and medically. Our partnership with Lake Tahoe Basin Prosperity Plan will help create a more resilient economy, while supporting the revitalization of environmental quality and an improved standard of living for our residents.

While we enhance patient care, expand our wellness programs and improve our facilities, we plan on continuing to support the economic wellbeing of South Lake Tahoe. We will accomplish this with contract work, mostly local, to expand our Community Clinic, by continuing to upgrade our patient rooms and by improving other patient care facilities.

In addition, as the largest year-round employer in South Lake Tahoe with more than 900 employees and contracts with groups who employ more than 140 physicians, we continue to support our area's businesses. We look forward to supporting our community's health for years to come.

John Williams is president and CEO of Barton Health.