Healthy Sheboygan County 2020 column: Differences, similarities between primary care doctors

Written by Dr. Donna J. Habeck For the Press
Nov. 19, 2013

Health

Care has been a hot topic lately due to the Affordable Healthcare Act. With the increase in people obtaining health insurance, there will be an increase in use of primary care offices. So now is a good time to review the types of doctors that work in a primary care office.

The three main types of primary care doctors include pediatricians, family practice doctors and internal medicine doctors. Often people refer to all primary care doctors as “family doctors,” regardless of the type of training. So let’s talk about their similarities and differences.

Let’s look at the similarities first. All three of these types of doctors completed four years of college, four years of medical school and went on to three years of residency training. The residency training is an intense period of time for a doctor and they put in long hours, which is currently limited to 80 hours per week. The tradeoff is the doctor gains a lot of experience with identifying and treating a large variety of medical conditions.

What makes the three types of primary care doctors different is the type of patients they learn to take care of during their residency. The pediatricians are trained to see patients from birth to 18 years old. They know how to identify a variety of medical conditions unique to children. They are experts on how a child develops on many different levels: physically, emotionally, and mentally.

An internal medicine doctor is also known as an “internist.” They concentrate their training on taking care of people over 18 years old. Internists and pediatricians are different, compared to family practice doctors, because their focus is in a specific age group. This allows them an option to go on to another residency to be a “specialist”. Examples of those types of specialties include cardiology, nephrology, endocrinology, rheumatology, pulmonology, gastroenterology, oncology, hematology, and infectious disease.

A family practice doctor is trained to see all ages as well as take care of pregnancies and births. The very term “family doctor” relays that they can take care of the whole family and that is evident from their training. The majority of family practice doctors practice in primary care offices and make up the biggest portion of primary care physicians. However, they too can work as a hospitalist, or go on for a limited number of specialties. Some examples of specialties a family practice doctor can train for include sports medicine, geriatrics, sleep medicine, and adolescent medicine.

A primary care doctor is there to help you understand ways to keep you healthy with regular wellness visits and to diagnose and treat and/or refer you to a specialist when you are having a problem with your health. There are a large number of primary care doctors to choose from in Sheboygan County. So, if you...
Dr. Donna J Habeck MD is a general practitioner, and practices in internal medicine and general practice.