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<http://www.bizjournals.com/kansascity/print-edition/2011/10/07/kansas-city-doctors-unite-to-preserve.html>

Kansas City doctors unite to preserve independence, build influence

Date: Friday, October 7, 2011, 5:00am CDT

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About 100 Kansas City-area doctors are forming an alliance to help preserve their practices in the face of big changes to the health care revenue landscape.

The Kansas City Metropolitan Physicians Association will hold its first formal meeting Oct. 13, but already it has amassed a large mix of internal medicine and family practice doctors, geriatricians and pediatricians looking for ways to better compete with hospitals and other large care organizations, which are set to attract a greater percentage of business from health insurers and are beginning to absorb independent practitioners.

The group intends to develop the influence and scale of a large practice group or hospital but preserve the independence of small practices.

Dr. **Nathan Granger**, the group's lead organizer and president of **Clay-Platte Family Medicine Clinic**, said that the association technically will be an independent practice association and that he's targeted primary-care physicians because he thinks they'll be in the best position to provide real value for potential health care partners.

"We think the primary-care physicians really have the patient and community's best interests at heart, more so than some of the other players in the health care system," Granger said. "We're trying to basically take the guys who are at the bottom of the pyramid and make sure we move to the top of the system in terms of leading the changes and participating in the new payment models."

The federal government and private insurers are looking to get away from the costly current system of paying providers based on the number of procedures they perform. Instead, they want to tie reimbursement to the quality of care a patient receives, emphasizing coordinated teams of physicians, specialists, hospitals and home care over the usual segmented approach to care.

That has led many independent physicians, afraid of being left out of the loop, to sell or otherwise abandon their practices for the perceived greater security of a hospital position.

But Granger said the association would help its members remain players in the system, using its scale to negotiate with insurers and even hospitals to provide services for their patients, creating computer networks to share patient information and forming subgroups to study ways to improve how they provide care and how to do it cheaper.

Dr. **Lancer Gates**, a North Kansas City-based hospitalist, is among those who have agreed to join. He said he liked the idea of a structure that sought to improve quality as well as preserve physicians' ability to be their own boss.

"I think that looking at the big picture, with ... the federal government looking at bundled payments for hospital readmissions and discharges, you have to be part of a team," he said. "It will either be forced on you, or you develop something that accomplishes the same goal."

Dr. **Bruce Bagley**, medical director of quality for the Leawood-based **American Academy of Family Physicians**, said that any effort to create a unified organization must prove it adds value to a particular market and that primary care-led IPAs are in the best position to do that.

"In communities where IPAs are already established, it provides a wonderful base because it has some infrastructure, some leadership, some buy-in," Bagley said. "Whenever you have that kind of change, there has to be some kind of collective discontent or compelling need, and that seems to be gathering rather quickly."

David reports about health care and transportation.

For more information on how to get involved in the KCMPPA contact Dr. Nathan Granger at (816) 842-4440 or email NathanDG1@aol.com. The next meeting is November 10th at 6:30pm at Metro Med's office 315 Nichols Rd, Ste. 250, KCMO 64112.