

Twin Falls' independent doctors see growth as patients seek health care options

TWIN FALLS — Tiffany Unger was looking for something different for her family's health care.

Their doctor at St. Luke's Magic Valley Medical Center, was wonderful, she said, but it was tough to get an appointment — especially at the last minute.

One day, Unger saw the sign for Tripp Family Medicine while at a nearby orthodontics office and decided to learn more.

As a patient, she noticed the Twin Falls clinic's atmosphere was different.

"It was that personal touch," she said.

On Wednesday while at Tripp Family Medicine — now her family's medical provider for five years — tears welled up in her eyes as she talked about Dr. Jonathan Tripp and his care for her family.

For patients, there's not always a one-size-fits-all approach for their health care needs. But there are only a handful of Twin Falls-area physicians to choose from who are independent of the St. Luke's Health System.

There are hospital systems, though, elsewhere across the Magic Valley: North Canyon Medical Center in Gooding, Cassia Regional Hospital in Burley and Minidoka Memorial Hospital in Rupert.

In Twin Falls, Tripp Family Medicine started from the ground up as an independent clinic and earlier this month celebrated its fifth anniversary.

Since its inception, the practice has grown to serve 6,000 patients, and it plans to add a fourth medical provider this fall.

The clinic's employees include Tripp, two physician assistants — Russell Singleton and Jeremy Dalley — plus licensed practical nurses and an office staff.

Tripp said his intent is to be a "minor threat" to St. Luke's and to provide "a reasonable alternative to corporate medicine."

"We've made it work financially without losing who we are," he said.

With a growing population across the region, St. Luke's can't do everything alone to meet health care needs, said Debbie Kytte, administrator of physician services and population health for St. Luke's East Region.

"We have a very dynamic, growing community with a lot of needs around access," she said. "I think it takes all of us to meet those needs. I think that practices all across the region are growing and are trying to keep up with that growth."

She cited recent data projecting Twin Falls County's population is expected to grow 16 percent between 2015 and 2025. "That's very significant," she said.

And there's already a shortage of medical providers. The biggest need is in behavioral health, Kytile said, and others include primary care, internal medicine, pediatrics, neurology and rheumatology.

It's great local independent practices are growing, Kytile said. "Here at St. Luke's, we have really great relationships with all different types of providers, regardless of their affiliation."

High tech, but old-fashioned

Tripp worked for four years covering 24-hour emergency room shifts at the Mountain Home Air Force Base.

He and his wife — Tricia, who's now office manager at Tripp Family Medicine — wanted to provide health care that was high-tech, but still old-fashioned.

As an employee in a health system, you have quotas to meet, Tripp said, and "you have demands not necessarily related to patient care."

He wanted something different.

Tripp started by seeing his first 10 or so patients out of a front room in his house. He did that while waiting on becoming a provider recognized by health insurance companies.

He moved the practice into a building on Fillmore Street. The office now accepts most insurance plans, including Blue Cross and SelectHealth.

Tripp's family practice offers a wide variety of services, including urgent care, pediatrics, aesthetic and skin, and occupational health.

"The only thing we don't do is obstetrics," he said.

Tripp says one the biggest compliments he can receive is the clinic doesn't feel like a doctor's office.

Independent providers vs. St. Luke's

In 2012, a group of Twin Falls-area independent health care professionals joined together to form an organization: Independent Health Care Providers of Idaho.

The group has between 50 and 100 members, and includes medical professionals such as physical therapists, in addition to physicians.

Independent providers in Twin Falls are surviving and doing well, said Dr. Marilyn Righetti, a group member and a physician at Snake River Ear Nose and Throat, and Marod Medical & Day Spa. "We stay very busy."

Why did Righetti decide to be an independent provider? "We like our independence," she said. "We like to be able to make our own decisions."

Righetti said independent providers are able to keep health care costs down for patients because they don't charge hospital facility fees.

But for patients, "they kind of have to know we're out there," Righetti said. As a provider, "when you're here a long time, a lot of it is word-of-mouth. If you do a good job, you're going to stay pretty busy."

One challenge: St. Luke's tends to refer patients within its own organization, Righetti said.

But Kytile said there's no requirement for St. Luke's doctors to refer within the health system.

"St. Luke's doesn't tell any providers who they should refer patients to," she said. "That is very important to us that physicians need to refer patients to facilities and providers that they feel is best for their patients."

St. Luke's Health System has strategies around partnering with other providers, Kytile said, to provide a coordination of care. That includes trying to come up with a way for independent providers to access St. Luke's electronic medical records.

St. Luke's has a system-wide system, meaning your records are available at any system clinic or hospital.

For patients who see independent providers, though, their records may not be accessible if they end up in a St. Luke's clinic or emergency room.

An 'easy fit' for two families

The Carmack family of Twin Falls has been coming to Tripp Family Medicine for three years. They're a blended family with five young children: ages 7, 6, 5, 3 and 2.

Emily had home births for many of her children. She said she had a hard time integrating with the medical world after that without judgement.

"A lot of people disagreed with how I was doing things," she said.

Emily asked around for recommendations for a new family practice doctor and a friend recommended Dr. Tripp. She said it was an easy fit for her family.

She said Tripp respects her choices to do "natural stuff" for health, but gives his honest medical opinion.

Tripp has a wide variety of knowledge, Emily said. He has even followed up with the family by phone and at their house after hours when problems arise.

The clinic's receptionists watch her children who aren't in an appointment and gives them cheese sticks.

Unger remembers when her daughter was having aches, Tripp took the time to draw a diagram on tissue paper to help explain what was going on.

And she remembers when Tripp actually took too much time for appointments and his staff had to come knock on the door.

Emily's husband, Richard, said he's impressed by how the clinic helps his family with the health care process, from setting up appointments to follow-up care.

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He used to be a nurse at a hospital but isn't currently working. He said it's fun to watch how Tripp Family Medicine operates. "This place is really different."

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