

Not just another year for CVPH

Colin Read: Everybody's Business

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— One of the events I most enjoy each year is the annual corporate meeting of the Champlain Valley Physician's Hospital Medical Center. It gives me an opportunity to take pride in yet another local institution that reaches beyond its grasp.

No institution is the product of just one person. In the history of CVPH, there have been visionaries of global proportion and functionaries who performed their jobs well for half a century, leaders who had the courage to follow a path less traveled, and those who were willing to follow them down new paths. The tens of thousands of individuals who have worked for CVPH and the health care professionals associated with the hospital have left a legacy in this community that is unparalleled in its Clinton County reach. And hundreds of thousands owe their good health to these good folks at CVPH.

As we recognize, merely touching a myriad people does not always justify admiration. Yet, sometimes we fail to fully appreciate the excellence of an organization until someone from the outside tells us so. And CVPH is earning many kudos these days.

In many measures, CVPH is doing well. This is somewhat unusual these days. One can imagine few institutions that are actually thriving right now. Indeed, hospitals across the country are struggling financially, and are looking for partnerships and mergers merely to allow them to keep their doors open.

Hospitals are on the front lines in a dysfunctional health-care system. They are the organizations charged with taking care of the vast population that is under-insured or uninsured. And they accept these patients who are often in dire health. Having avoided private clinics and physicians that demand cash or health insurance, these unfortunate individuals among us turn up at the emergency room lobby when their conditions have become perilous.

At that point, our hospitals are obliged to take these patients in and stabilize their condition. Of course, the reason why so many individuals do not have insurance in the first place is because they cannot afford it. So, when these individuals end up at our hospital's door, it is the hospital that foots the bill.

Hospitals must inevitably add these costs to the payments we all make. And they try to recover some of those costs by running their operations with such efficiency that savings elsewhere can subsidize the uninsured.

An interesting aspect about CVPH is that it can actually add to its modest cash reserves each year, despite the bad economy and tough health care environment. Our hospital also manages to expand the services and procedures it provides to us, attract doctors of surprising skill and experience, and offer innovative programs that are the envy of rural health networks elsewhere.

One major innovation championed by CVPH is the Medical Home project. This fascinating initiative seems to fly in the face of what seems doable. It has assembled perhaps a dozen insurers willing to try to deliver health

care in a novel and more effective way. It has attracted many more local area primary-care physicians who must be willing to do more than what they already do, with new technologies they would be less than keen to adopt without the support of an entity like CVPH. And it must enlist the participation of thousands of patients that would normally rely on the hospital's outpatient facilities.

Despite these challenges, the hospital is succeeding. Its bright idea is to provide primary-care physicians with the digital records and the technologies that would allow them to deliver high-quality medical care on a routine basis and with more intimate patient knowledge than could be afforded in an institutional setting. The patients benefit from high-quality care at their local primary-care office. The doctors become part of a larger digital network that is leading edge, and are able to expand their practices in new ways. And the insurers expect to yield long-term cost savings as health care is administered in more efficient and cost effective ways.

So, why is CVPH engaged in this project? After all, this first-of-its-kind initiative takes an awful lot of effort to create and coordinate.

Sometimes, organizations innovate and create opportunities when all others are retrenching. Some organizations recognize that a crisis is also an opportunity. And some organizations realize that the stakes are so high that there is moral imperative to explore new ways to deliver critical public services. CVPH is not alone as a beacon on a hill. Just look around.

I was driving through the former Plattsburgh Air Force Base today, and I could not help but admire a beautiful airport terminal that at once represents the history of the Adirondacks and our ability to stretch into the future.

I drove a little farther, and I saw the incredible Clinton Community College building, perched on a hill and bathed in a beam of sunlight. And I attended a meeting where I learned that one of our community banks is actually stronger and more sound than ever, despite the carnage realized at other regional banks of its size.

It reminds me that there are amazing things happening right here. Those that come from outside see them, even if we ourselves may not take notice of some of our greatest assets right here in town. When I see the tremendous initiatives taken by a few great visionaries right here in Clinton County, I am proud to live in the North Country. We have been fortunate to have more than our fair share of these visionaries.

The health-care world is watching this Medical Home project. Let us celebrate in its imagination, too. And let these symbols of North Country excellence remind us all that vision is not bestowed upon us from above. Instead, vision and excellence comes from those of us willing to try something new and novel, and stand undeterred by the nay-sayers that would always like to keep things just the way they are.

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