

What's new in medicine? How about house calls

By Celinda Emison

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If you think house calls by medical professionals are a thing of the past, think again.

On Tuesday, Pablo Garza was happy to open the door when nurse practitioner Kaye Kendall came calling.

Garza, of Haskell, was one of about 12 patients Kendall saw in Haskell on Tuesday under new program implemented by Care Improvement Plus, which provides annual house calls to chronically ill patients.

"Texas has a growing shortage of primary care providers, an issue which significantly impacts residents in rural areas of the state," said Lee Spruiell, senior vice president of field operations for Care Improvement Plus. "As a Medicare health plan that focuses on those with chronic conditions such as diabetes and heart failure, our solution is in essence, bringing back the old-fashioned house call and providing our members the chance to meet with someone like Kaye Kendall, who will take time to answer their questions and comprehensively assess their health care needs, with feedback provided to their primary care doctor."

The goal is to improve the quality and care of Medicare members who are suffering from diabetes, heart failure and other serious illnesses.

"It was very informative," Garza said. "She informed me of the things that are available to me, checked my blood pressure and made sure I was taking my medication correctly."

Kendall, a nurse for 39 years and a nurse practitioner for three years, began with the house call program in March. Since then she has traveled all over Texas and has seen about 400 patients.

In the Big Country, she has seen patients in Albany, Anson, Brownwood, Early, Hamlin, Jayton, Roby, Rotan,



Photo contributed.

Nurse Practitioner Kaye Kendall made a house call at the home of Pablo Garza in Haskell on Tuesday. Kendall is traveling throughout Texas making house calls for patients who are Care Improvement Plus, a health plan associated with Medicare.

Rochester, Rule, Sweetwater and Weinert.

Care Improvement Plus began the house call initiative in 2008 and offers three different Medicare health plans, all of which combine medical coverage — hospital and doctors' visits — with a Part D prescription drug benefit, additional care management services, and value-added benefits such as dental coverage, vision benefits and transportation services.

According to a recent Congressional Budget Office report, Medicare recipients with multiple chronic conditions currently account for 75 percent of Medicare spending.

There are approximately 580,000 Medicare beneficiaries in Texas living with chronic illnesses such as diabetes and heart failure, according to data from Care Improvement Plus.

The program offers additional benefits and services, such as preventive screenings, health education and the support of a personal health care team.

"We try to find things the doctor may be missing," Kendall said. "Since we are in their home, we may see things that the patient may not realize that are wrong."

The home visit is part of the ongoing efforts of Care Improvement Plus to provide better coordinated care and a more stable "medical home" for its chronically ill members. It assists the member's regular physician in coordinating care across multiple providers, but is not a service that replaces the role of a doctor.

The idea is to keep patients healthy. "Through assessment we are trying to make people healthy to see if there is anything missing that we can do to keep them out of the hospital," Kendall said.

Kendall said that even though some rural areas are lacking in health care providers, for the most part, all of her patients were very health-savvy.

"The patients are really taking care of themselves," she said. "About 90 percent of the patients I have seen are doing a great job."

Kendall said she enjoys providing the service.

"The patients are grateful for anything that is going to make them healthier and keep them out of the hospital," Kendall said. "It is a blessing."