

Health care professionals consider 'lifestyle medicine' to address various chronic illnesses

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As more options become available to pursue a healthy lifestyle, from dietary choices to exercise plans to preventative medicine and other advances, one organization—and one South Florida doctor in

particular—is leading a movement toward "lifestyle medicine."

The American College of Lifestyle Medicine hosted its annual conference in Orlando recently where health care professionals from around the world convened to discuss recent advances in lifestyle [medicine](#) and how to most effectively treat common diagnoses. The ACLM is a working group of physicians, nurses, dietitians and other [health care professionals](#). And interest appears to be growing.

"It's been quite remarkable that in the last five years, ACLM membership has grown more than 500 percent," said Susan Benigas, the organization's executive director.

"In the face of epidemic levels of physician and clinician burnout, it's really lifestyle medicine that reignites the passion for why so many went into medicine to begin with, and that's to become true healers."

Benigas says that lifestyle medicine takes an approach that aims to prevent [disease](#) or at least treat and reverse disease, instead of simply managing the symptoms or reducing pain.

"There's so much emphasis in our health care system today on disease management—on diagnosing symptoms and treating those symptoms, really managing those diseases, with ever-increasing quantities of pills and procedures," Benigas said.

"What's so unique about evidence-based lifestyle medicine is that the focus is on treating the root cause of disease to identify and eradicate the root cause of disease so the focus is not solely on disease management, but on health restoration."

In addition to the lifestyle changes themselves for patients, the ACLM is trying to transform the way health care providers meet and treat patients,

including group appointments and remote appointments when the patients' circumstances allow for it through things like Skype or other video and digital apps.

"When it's just one treatment room with one physician and one patient and you have such a limited amount of time—10, 15 minutes—only enough, as one of our founding members, Dr. Hans Diehl would always say, "That's only enough time to diagnosis the ill, prescribe the pill and send the patient home with the bill," and that is not the way we want our healthcare system to be run," Benigas said.

"So in a shared medical appointment environment, it will be a group of patients that may all have Type-2 diabetes or that may all be dealing with heart disease or it may just be a group all dealing with various chronic conditions, because from a lifestyle medicine standpoint, the prescription for one chronic condition is the prescription for all, and then that group will meet for successive number of weeks, maybe two hours in the evening or on the weekends over a period of eight weeks, 10 weeks, 12 weeks with a curriculum and it really does help when so much of this is based on needing to educate patients about their lifestyle behavior choices."

Dr. Tina Discepola is a physician based in Palm Beach County and a member of ACLM who talks to patients over a video conference app that allows her to talk to and see patients from around the world. Discepola says her appointments last an average of 60 to 90 minutes.

"It's still very difficult, when you have a sick patient come in, no matter how much time they spend with you in the office, we almost wish you could go home with them to get them to fully understand what they need to do and you can't do that from an office setting," she said.

"This is a non-judgment zone to let (patients) know they have a team

behind them is really No. 1. And then No. 2, I think it's really about educating the patient, so that they understand that most chronic disease is reversible. They have the power. And that's a hard one to get through."

Discepola talks a lot about the root of many diseases, which she says largely stem from diets that contribute to things like heart disease, high cholesterol and high blood pressure.

"We are looking for core dysfunction as to 'why does this person have three significant diagnoses and on five different medications for something that is potentially reversible?'" she said.

"I moved from a brick and mortar, moved (from New York) down here to Florida, became medical director of a facility, where folks come from all over the world to learn how to adopt a vegan diet or close to a vegan diet and it was a 21-day program and that intrigued me."

Benigas said the organization's growing numbers are a good sign, but they still want to expand their presence in medical and lifestyle circles.

"We really want to be a resource to help fill the gaping void that exists in regard to medical education in this country as far as lifestyle medicine is concerned and to really help to equip and empower medical professionals to integrate lifestyle medicine into their own lives and clinical practices," she said.

Discepola wants the ACLM to get [lifestyle](#) medicine into academia and neighborhoods and communities.

"Just like we have golf communities, people buy into these communities, imagine that, where wellness is the theme," she said.

More information: Visit LifestyleMedicine.org

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