

Healthcare, VIP Style

Program at Good Samaritan Hospital Targets
New Downtown Residents

by **Ryan Vaillancourt**

The welcome letter that Good Samaritan Hospital Los Angeles sends patients when they sign up for its new VIP Program is intended to have a familiar, financial-tinged look.

The gold metallic envelope shimmers as it is unsealed. Inside, along with the welcome literature, is a wallet-sized plastic rectangle. Like the envelope, the card is shiny gold, and it includes the patient's name and an expiration date.

If it reminds the cardholder of a credit card, then the hospital has succeeded, said Angela Pelayo, director of Good Samaritan's VIP Program. That's because the credit card is a symbol of convenience, she said, and the VIP Program is an attempt to capture new, affluent Downtown residents by offering what the hospital is packaging as convenient healthcare.

The card, for one, will get members into a special waiting room separate from the Emergency Room lobby when there is a serious health issue. Additionally, patients needing treatment will wait far less than the average eight hours it takes in Los Angeles emergency waiting rooms, said Andrew Leeka, the hospital's president and chief executive officer.

Leeka is quick to point out that, just because they have a card, VIP patients would not get a few stitches while those with more severe ailments wait in line. Among patients with similar conditions, however, VIP members would get priority treatment.

"You come in, go to your own separate room for VIPs and then the attention that you get is more personal," Leeka said.

The program has other benefits too. The hospital can immediately access cardholders' medical records when they come in for treatment, speeding up the time it takes to assess their condition and process paperwork, Leeka said.



Andrew Leeka, president and CEO of Good Samaritan Hospital, hopes that the healthcare program will introduce some of Downtown's new residents to the City West institution. Photo by Gary Leonard.

To join the VIP Program, patients must also choose one of the hospital's 12 participating care physicians, which is really Good Samaritan's primary goal with the initiative, Leeka said.

"Our first task is to get a primary care physician hooked up with new members of the Downtown residential community," he said.

Everyone's a VIP

Perhaps the most unique aspect of the VIP Program is that patients do not have to fit the stereotypical image of a very important person. It is open to more than high-profile executives and politicians. Additionally, membership in the program is free.

In that sense, the shiny new card is more of a marketing tool to connect patients with the hospital than a service in and of itself.

"It kind of has to have a glitzy name to it, but it's really the same thing," Leeka said. "Whether you're homeless or you're Madonna, who had her child here, you're staying in the same bed."

The major service that comes optional with VIP membership - an "executive" physical - is not free, however. The nearly two-hour, comprehensive examination, which patients pay for out of pocket (individual insurance plans may cover a portion of it), costs \$2,000, or \$2,300 if it includes a virtual colonoscopy. Though not required, the exam is geared toward Downtown's affluent residents, as well as professionals who work in the area and want a doctor close to the office, but live elsewhere.

"We have 15,000 new residents. That's something I thought I'd never see before," Leeka said, referring to the residential rush of the past eight years. "It used to be tumbleweeds blowing across Central City West after 5 p.m. But still, a lot of those people don't even know we're here just on the other side of the freeway"

By Leeka's estimation, much of Downtown's growing population can afford the \$2,000 it costs for the physical, especially if it is viewed as a long-term investment in personal health.

In Good Samaritan's attempt to pitch the program, executives, doctors and marketing personnel have arranged meetings in the Downtown Los Angeles offices of businesses such as financial firms Ernst & Young and Deloitte & Touche. They have also attended cocktail parties at some of the area's new upscale residential developments including the Sky Lofts, the Market Lofts and 1100 Wilshire, Pelayo said.

"A lot of them are spending \$2,000 on a tune-up on their BMW and they're thinking, 'I'm worth more than my BMW. I need a tune-up too,'" Leeka said.

Not Your Average Physical

The executive physical starts a couple days before the exam, when the patient is sent a Nike sweat suit to wear during the tests.

On test day, the patient arrives at 8 a.m. and provides urine and blood samples. Good Samaritan staffers record their height, weight, blood pressure, pulse and respiration rates. Then the real test begins.

A doctor presides over an electrocardiogram and a specialist conducts a chest X-ray and an ultrasound reading of the carotid artery, which provides the head and neck with oxygenated blood. Still left to go are the bone density scan, a virtual colonoscopy, plus an optional pap smear and mammogram for women, and an optional prostate exam for men.

There is also a bevy of laboratory analyses, including a cholesterol reading and hepatitis A, B and C tests.

After the tests, the patient sits down with his or her primary care physician to assess the results. Between the two-hour exam and follow up with the physician, the process is supposed to end in four hours and, ideally, there is only good news in the results, as well as the beginning of a doctor-patient relationship, Leeka said.

"People usually don't find a primary care physician until they're sick," he said. "Our objective is to get you when you're healthy."

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