



Philip G. Parry/For The Valley Independent

Dr. Scott Serbin looks over 1-year-old patient Ellie Roh, as her mother, Mary, looks. Serbin is the nation's first pediatric concierge physician, a service that gives access to a doctor 24 hours a day with no waiting for appointments and longer time with the doctor for a pre-set fee.

Pediatrician leaves medical mainstream

Serbin is available to his patients around the clock.

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It's early afternoon at the North Side office of pediatrician Dr. Scott Serbin, and the waiting room is quiet.

No coughing kids. No fighting parents. No crying babies. Other than two office workers behind the desk, and the doctor seeing two patients behind closed doors, the place is empty.

That's the idea, Serbin said. Nine months ago, Serbin joined a burgeoning national trend in health care by becoming what some call a "concierge physician."

Patients pay him a fee in exchange for after-hours access, house calls, hour-long appointments and other, more personalized, forms of care.

He charges \$100 a month for children 6 and younger, \$50 for children ages 7 to 18, and \$20 apiece for any child after two have been paid for.

"I'm able to do things other physicians just can't do," Serbin said. "The average pediatrician sees 25 to 30 patients per day. We might see six patients per day."

Serbin claims to be the only concierge pediatrician in the nation, and the only concierge doctor of any kind in Western Pennsylvania.

Though this type of care has been around for almost 10 years, only about 146 concierge physicians were operating nationwide in 2004, according to Congress' General Accounting Office.

Serbin said he decided to abandon his standard pediatric practice in favor of his new venture, Pinnacle Pediatrics, after becoming "extremely frustrated" with

insurance companies cutting back on reimbursements and high patient loads that did not allow him to give patients the attention he wanted to.

"My last year in practice — 2004 — I made 40 percent less than what I made 10 years before that," he said. "But I was seeing the same number of patients and working just as hard."

Switching to the new model, Serbin cut his patient load from 2,500 children to a little over 200. At most, he figures he can have as many as 500 patients now.

Critics deride the practice as elitist, saying it's yet another way to give rich people better health care than poor people.

Reiko Becker of Oakland used to take her son Nicholas, 5, to be treated by Serbin. "In a way, he was sacrificing patients like my son for people in a n o t h e r stratosphere of income," she said.

She called Serbin "a great, great doctor," and has since found another pediatrician she's happy with, but she still wishes she hadn't had to switch.

"I don't begrudge him at all," said Becker, 45. "I understand that nowadays it's difficult for doctors to do what they want to do with patients. It just seems innately unfair to me that I had to choose this in order for the more wealthier patients to get what he's promising."

Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield removed Serbin from its list of primary care physicians when he became

a concierge doctor.

The insurance carrier doesn't let doctors into its network unless they agree to treat every person the company insures, said spokeswoman Denise Grabner.

Serbin's monthly fee covers any out-of-pocket expenses an insurance company might charge, he said.

"There's no balance billing to the patient," Serbin said.

Because of that, Mary Pompeo, of Aspinwall, said the \$1,200 she pays annually for her two children now is probably less than what she paid when she had to take hours off work, drive to

the North Side and fork over a \$20 co-payment for every illness or injury.

Pompeo's children — Maria, 16, and Anthony, 13 — both play several sports and are frequent visitors of Serbin's.

"He comes to the house. He goes out of his way," Pompeo, 48, said.

"It's the kind of attention that you always wish you could get but think you never will."

If he was the only doctor in a small town, Serbin said, his sense of ethics wouldn't let him run this kind of practice.

But being in a region with hundreds of other doctors means he's not stopping anyone from getting treatment, he said.

"The bottom line is I'm just giving people a choice," Serbin said. "Some people choose to send their children to private school. Nobody's saying private schools should shut down because they're elitist."

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