

It's time for **HEALTHCARE STEWARDSHIP**

*Dale J. Block, MD, says we can't rescue healthcare until we understand healthcare stewardship. In his new book he explains it, and in his work he puts it into practice—
with extraordinary results.*

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We all know that healthcare in the U.S. is in crisis. Runaway costs, bureaucratic inefficiency, lack of access, and a profit-before-patient philosophy have combined to make the U.S. healthcare system one of the most wasteful and counterproductive in the world.

Dale J. Block, MD, is a celebrated physician and health management expert, who has received both the Golden Stethoscope Award for Clinical Quality and the Maverick Award for Innovation. In his two-plus decades of experience he has seen first-hand how the healthcare system has failed the people it's supposed to serve. "The bureaucracy we call the U.S. healthcare system is about politics and profitably, not patient care," he says. As the Obama administration grapples with how to repair the system, Block argues that unless their efforts are based on an understanding of what he calls "healthcare stewardship" real reform is unlikely. "Healthcare stewardship means using our limited healthcare resources in a manner that is clinically, ethically, politically, environmentally, and socially responsible. If the new administration is to initiate long-term change it has to understand how to do this." It starts with putting the patient first. "Take care of people and the financials will take care of themselves," says Block.

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In his new book **Healthcare Stewardship: A Guide to Improving the Health of All Americans** (April 2009; iUniverse, hardcover) Block lays out a comprehensive plan for reforming American healthcare from the grassroots to the government, from the community to the corporation. In his work as a clinician and physician executive, he has used the principles of healthcare stewardship to transform dysfunctional healthcare systems into models of quality care and efficiency (See page 3 for an account of his recent work at Nature Coast Health System in Florida).

Block is available for interview. Here's just some of what he can discuss:

- **HEALTHCARE STEWARDSHIP: AN 8-POINT PLAN FOR CHANGE** (page 2)
- **HEALTHCARE STEWARDSHIP IN ACTION: HOW HE'S TAKING ONE COMMUNITY HOSPITAL FROM A DISASTER TO A THRIVING CENTER OF QUALITY CARE** (page 3)
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ONLINE:

- www.healthcarestewardship.com

HEALTHCARE STEWARDSHIP: AN 8-POINT PLAN FOR CHANGE

Implementing healthcare stewardship means making change at every level. Block offers this 8-point plan.

- **Establish a basic healthcare package for all Americans.** Before we can begin to reform how healthcare services are delivered, we need to establish a basic healthcare package that is standardized, evidence-based and available to all Americans, regardless of their insurance status, socioeconomic class, or employment status.
- **Move from a sick-care system to a well-care system.** Most of our healthcare dollars are spent on treating acute health problems and chronic diseases, and yet we still lag behind 38 countries in healthcare outcomes. More resources need to go to disease prevention, health promotion and wellness programs. We must fix our public health system and reestablish population health management. In addition, we must train and certify community health workers, increase funding for community health centers, teach basic first-aid and health concepts to every American, and recognize the role that families, friends, communities, and the environment play in creating a healthy population. These efforts need to be deployed on the local level, but coordinated and tracked nationally.
- **Use evidence-based medicine.** If you think this sounds redundant, think again. Often medical decisions are based on clinical experience alone leading to a massive waste of resources and no advantage for patients. While clinical judgment has its place we need to rely first and foremost on the science to ensure the best possible outcomes.
- **Require insurance companies to put patients first.** Insurance companies have put profits before patients and have enjoyed a virtually unrestricted ability to make decisions solely based on bottom-line calculations. Senior-level executives receive compensation and a bonus based on how much is not paid out for healthcare services. This must change, and government must be willing to take on the health insurance industry.
- **Encourage physicians and patients to use healthcare resources wisely.** Physicians too often order unnecessary tests or opt for the latest technology or medication when cheaper and equally effective alternatives are available. For their part, patients often use emergency services and other medical resources when office visits or home care is more in order. Educating both professionals and lay people about the need to use our limited resources wisely is essential.
- **Get doctors in the trenches involved.** While President Obama's commitment to healthcare reform is laudable, Block says that the doctors who work day-to-day in the trenches of healthcare delivery have invaluable insights and firsthand knowledge that the administration isn't seeking. Getting them involved is essential for creating reform that works not just in theory, but in practice.
- **Establish a national database for healthcare information.** The absence of a centralized location for patients' medical records results in duplication of paperwork and tests, incomplete patient records, and less-than-optimal care. Creating a national healthcare information database would slash administrative costs, make doctors more efficient, and improve patient care.
- **Create a national agency to promote transparency and accountability regarding healthcare outcomes.** Transparency and accountability are the hallmarks of socially responsible healthcare delivery. To ensure that they are maintained, Block says we should have an impartial national agency that would identify medical providers, hospitals, and clinics that are following evidence-based clinical guidelines to achieve positive healthcare outcomes for their patients. It would provide reliable, real-time information to the public that would allow them to find the best care.

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NATURE COAST REGIONAL HOSPITAL & HEALTH SYSTEM: HEALTHCARE STEWARDSHIP IN ACTION

A “WRECK” OF A HOSPITAL

“It was a wreck.” That’s how Mary Marshall described Nature Coast Regional Hospital in Williston, Florida before Dr. Block took over as Chief Medical Officer and Chief of Medical Staff in July of 2008. Marshall was admitted to the hospital with a severe gallbladder attack in 2005. Once there, the staff ran a battery of tests, which she later learned from her surgeon were unnecessary. “He was flabbergasted when I told him about them,” she says. She couldn’t get a nurse or doctor to explain the tests or discuss her situation. The lights and water didn’t work, the TV was on the blink, and there were no toiletries. “I felt like I was in a prison, and I have all kinds of insurance,” says Marshall. When her husband complained, a nurse threatened to turn Marshall out of the hospital. Not surprisingly, she vowed never to return and began making the 30-mile trek to Gainesville, Florida for medical care, rather than stay in her hometown of Williston. She was planning to do this in December of 2008 when she was suffering from pneumonia, but her daughter, who had been treated by Dr. Block—he also serves as a family physician at Nature Coast—encouraged her to give the hospital another try. Admitted once again, she couldn’t believe it was the same place she had languished in three years earlier. “It was the best care I ever got,” she says, still amazed by the transformation. “The doctors and nurses were so caring; everything worked. Even the food was wonderful!” she says.

HEALTHCARE STEWARDSHIP TO THE RESCUE

Block assumed clinical oversight for all the physician services at Nature Coast Health System in July 2008 with a mandate to rescue the hospital and family health center. “I believed I could provide the clinical leadership necessary to help turn the hospital around and make it a desirable place for patients,” he says. He adds that the hospital was the perfect “blank canvas” for him to apply his healthcare stewardship ideas. In the short time since Block has been at the helm as Chief Medical Officer, NCRHS has gone from a facility that the community ran from to one that it flocks to. Like Marshall, most residents of Williston chose to make the trip to Gainesville rather than visit their hometown hospital and family health center. Recently, Block and his physician assistant, James Long, broke the ten-year monthly record for patients treated at NCRHC. He and Long now see over 600 patients a month. They started with zero. He has increased hours that patients may be seen in the health center, introduced clinical quality standards for evidence-based care for all medical personnel in the health system, reformed the medical record process, and begun to educate the community on preventative care. Block requires that all physicians and mid-level providers perform careful patient assessments before ordering tests and use generic medication whenever possible. Block and his team also make sure to include families in the care of patients, and to educate patients about all of their options and about the importance of evidence-based medicine. The effect has been felt throughout the community’s health infrastructure. Cheryl Scharoun, RN, the Chief Operating Officer at Williston Rehab and Nursing Center, where NCRHS patients are sent for rehabilitation and skilled nursing services, has seen a dramatic change. “It’s been phenomenal. Patients are now coming to us in stable condition, whereas before they often hadn’t been stabilized and we had to send them back to the hospital. Patients and their families are also much better educated about their condition and what they need to do to recover,” she says. Block was recently named as Williston Rehabilitation and Nursing Center’s medical director.

WHEN A COMMUNITY IS IN TROUBLE, QUALITY HEALTHCARE IS A POWERFUL FORCE

Williston, Florida is afflicted with many of the problems of rural America: a high unemployment rate, a high rate of uninsured residents, rampant drug abuse and alcoholism, a high level of teen pregnancy, and illiteracy. When Block took over at NCRHS, he quickly realized that approximately 30-40 percent of his patients are illiterate. Mistrust of the medical system ran high. Yet, because of Block’s healthcare stewardship Williston is enjoying a health revival. Patients are being educated on how to get and stay well and they’re receiving top-notch care. “When Dr. Block speaks in our community he comes away with two or three new patients,” says Kim Bird, CEO of NCRHS, “he’s the pied piper and he’s the pied piper for all the right reasons—patient health and care.”

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ECOLOGICAL MEDICINE: WHY IT'S PART OF THE SOLUTION

"Healthcare stewardship and environmental stewardship are inseparable," says Block. That's because environmental degradation has a direct impact on the health of our population, which in turn places demands on our healthcare resources. If we do not protect our environment, these demands will become ever-greater. That's why Block is a champion of the cutting-edge field of ecological medicine. "Ecological medicine makes the important connection between caring for the environment and caring for our health." As a physician, Block recognizes that environmental factors play a significant role in determining the health and well-being of patients. "Pollution, high use of pesticides and herbicides, lead paint exposure, and mold exposure are just a few of the environmental hazards that physicians need to become more vigilant about," he says. Protecting the environment is essential for protecting our health and our limited healthcare resources.

OUR VAST UNTAPPED RESOURCES: THE ROLE COMMUNITIES CAN & MUST PLAY IN HEALTHCARE

"In our public discussion about healthcare the role of communities is almost always left out," says Block. And that's a shame, because our communities can be a powerful force in getting and keeping us well. Block proposes a nationwide program for training lay people to be community health educators. Once trained, they would then educate their community on preventative health strategies. Some communities have already launched such programs with great success. With a nationwide push, this kind of community-based effort could dramatically increase the health of all Americans at a price tag that is a fraction of what it costs to treat preventable illnesses.

ABOUT DALE J. BLOCK, MD

Dale J. Block, MD, CPE, has been a licensed, practicing physician for 21 years. Board certified in Family Practice and Medical Management, Block has achieved success in private practice, academia, corporate medicine, and in the health insurance industry.



Block is currently practicing clinical primary, occupational and environmental medicine with Nature Coast Family Health Center in Williston, Florida. He also serves as the Chief of Medical Staff and the Chief Medical Officer for Nature Coast Regional Hospital in Williston, Florida. He was recently appointed to the medical director position at Williston Rehabilitation and Nursing Center. Block focuses on improving access to quality health care and the cost-efficient delivery of integrated medical services in this underserved, rural community.

As the President of Block Medical Consulting, LLC, Block provides expert medical consultation in a number of health care related areas including occupational and environmental medicine, primary care medicine, and corporate and medical management. Block Medical Consulting, LLC's mission is to empower employees, employers, providers, payers, and all the healthcare stakeholders to succeed in their ability to navigate through the dynamic world of health care delivery today and in the future.

As former Adjunct Assistant Professor in Duquesne University's Department of Health Systems Management, Block has taught undergraduate and graduate students in Health Management Systems the following courses during his tenure on the faculty:

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Quality Assurance/Performance Improvement, Medical Informatics, Outcomes Management, Practice Management, and Clinical Processes. His research interests include healthcare outcomes, integrated health and productivity management, and clinical effectiveness at the point of care.

In 2006, Block published his first textbook, *Healthcare Outcomes Management: Strategies for Planning and Evaluation*. He is also the author of several publications and abstracts.

Block, his wife Ellen and his three sons are residents of Gainesville, Florida.

SUGGESTED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Your plan for reforming American healthcare rests on what you call “healthcare stewardship.” Explain what this means and how you would apply it to our healthcare system.
2. Since mid-2008 you’ve worked at Nature Coast Regional Health System in Williston, FL, which was a dysfunctional system before you arrived. Can you explain why the hospital and clinic weren’t functioning properly and how you applied your ideas of healthcare stewardship there?
3. Nature Coast is in a rural community. What are the healthcare challenges facing rural America and how do they differ from urban areas?
4. In your book, *Healthcare Stewardship*, you discuss the idea of the medical commons. Can you explain what this is and how it fits into healthcare stewardship?
5. You talk a lot about the role communities have to play in healthcare. That’s something that’s rarely included in our public discussion. How do you think communities should be involved in healthcare?
6. President Obama has said that healthcare reform has to be a top priority. What has he done so far in regard to healthcare that you like and don’t like?
7. Imagine you’re appointed by the President to lead healthcare reform in the U.S. What are a few of the things you do first and why?
8. Insurance companies are seen by many as a roadblock to quality, affordable care. Do you share this view and what role do you think they should have in healthcare?
9. You say the U.S. has a “sick care system” and that we have to move to a “well-care system.” What do you mean?
10. You say that doctors often make clinical decisions that are not evidence-based and that they too often opt for the latest technology and medication when equally effective and cheaper alternatives are available. Why do you think this happens and how would you change it?

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11. You also say that patients too often visit emergency rooms or seek professional treatment, when home care or office visits are more appropriate. Why do you think this is and how would you go about changing it?
12. In your book, *Healthcare Stewardship*, you talk about the patient-centered “medical home.” What is this and what role does it play in healthcare stewardship?
13. You say that “transparency and accountability are the hallmarks of socially responsible healthcare delivery.” Do you think our healthcare system lacks transparency and accountability and, if so, how would you change that?
14. What is the biopsychosocial approach to medicine and why do you use it?
15. In your book, *Healthcare Stewardship*, you talk about ecological medicine. What is this and how is part of healthcare reform?