

Dial-an-ER

Hospital ERs charge a lot for mediocre customer service. Microsoft asks doctors to make house calls instead | By David Whelan



LAST CHRISTMAS EVE MICHAEL HARDING'S WIFE Gretchen was in bed with the stomach flu. The Microsoft product tester worried that she was getting dehydrated and called a nurse hotline that's part of the company's plan with Premera Blue Cross. The nurse recommended they pack up and go to the emergency room. It wasn't a fun thought on a holiday, especially for a family with two small children. "Our trips to the ER had never lasted less than four hours," Harding says.

Then Harding remembered a health benefit that Microsoft had just announced: house calls. After another phone call a doctor was sitting in their bedroom within 30 minutes. He examined Gretchen,

then wrote a prescription to relieve her nausea. Gretchen then wrote a thank-you note to Microsoft: "I felt like Laura Ingalls Wilder," the author of novels about pioneer families. "Thanks for caring enough to try something old."

House calls from doctors—a throwback to folksier times—is a new perk for employees. Microsoft offers the service to 85,000 employees and family members covered by its health plan in and around Seattle. Cecily Hall, director of employee benefits at Microsoft, says the benefit will save the company \$1 million this year because traveling doctors are cheaper than emergency rooms.

ER spending has risen 70% over the last three years at Microsoft, but all employers with health plans have this problem. Nationally, a trip to the ER costs \$700 on average. And that's if you can get in. Over the past decade visits have spiked 18% to 110 million, while the number of ERs has fallen 12% to 4,500.

A Seattle company called Carena staffs and dispatches Microsoft's house-call service, with ten full-time physicians on standby. Started by physician Edward (Ted) Conklin, formerly a professor of family medicine at the University of Washington, the company was founded to

The doctor is in: Edward Conklin of Carena. tap doctors to assess workers' compensation claims. Conklin realized that just as workers' comp helps keep people on the job, a similar service could allow sick people to stay home instead of going to the ER.

House calls have been making a comeback here and there. But they are usually offered either as a luxury service or for housebound elderly patients. MD², a Seattle-area concierge medicine practice, will send a doctor to a private home if you pay to join its club, which costs \$24,000 a year for a family of four. On the other end of the spectrum, Medicare is experimenting with using house calls as a cheap way to provide care to old people with chronic illnesses rather than putting them in expensive nursing homes.

Carena is the first to offer house calls as part of a company health plan. With \$6.5 million in venture capital, Carena is trying to find other big self-insured clients like Microsoft to join its network. (The state of Kentucky signed on this month.) It charges \$570 or

so per visit—\$450 goes to Carena and \$120 or so to the doctor—but discounts heavily, based on volume. (It pays doctors a salary in addition to fees per visit to make up for them seeing only five patients during a typical eight-hour shift.) Carena aims to save Microsoft 25% off the usual cost for a visit to the ER.

It also makes employees feel good about their workplace. Catherine Moya, a technical writer in Microsoft's server division, used the service after her 6-year-old daughter Rowan's belly pains lasted for a day and a half. An hourlong house call made by a doctor allowed Rowan to stay in bed and read her favorite books. Turned out she had a virus. Looking back on the experience, Rowan says: "It was cool." **F**