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## Independent doctors unite to fight national trend toward hospitals buying physician groups

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April 3, 2013 | By Marni Jameson, Orlando Sentinel

Since January, at least 114 local doctors have traded their independence for steady paychecks from hospitals. The move, part of a nationwide trend, has wide implications not only for doctors but also for [patients](#)' pocketbooks.

Often, patients don't realize their physician has become a hospital employee until they get their bill. These often will be higher because hospitals can negotiate higher reimbursement rates with insurers, according to comparisons on insurance Web sites.

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To [help](#) educate patients and represent their concerns to legislators, independent physicians and business leaders in Central Florida have banded together to form a trade association that may well be the first in the state, according to organizers.

The inaugural meeting of the Association of Independent Doctors takes place Thursday night in Orlando.

"The number of independent doctors is shrinking, which is not a favorable [dynamic](#) for patients or for health-care costs," said Tommy Thomas, a Winter Park accountant, who started the organization with business partner Carol Zurcher and local health-care attorney David Schick.

Today, 39 percent of doctors nationwide are on their own, down from 57 percent who were independent in 2000, according to a physician survey conducted by the consulting [company](#), Accenture. Doctors cited the costs of running a practice as the main reason.

Independent physicians see the trend as a threat.

"We want to keep the practice of medicine between patient and physician," said Dr. Steve Lester, a radiation oncologist and charter member of the new trade association. "As hospitals acquire doctors, they are inserting themselves in that relationship."

Lester was forced to leave Winter Park Hospital, which Florida Hospital bought in 2000, after the hospital brought in a group of hospital-employed radiation oncologists. He later sued Florida Hospital and settled the suit in 2006 for "a significant cash amount," he said.

Dr. Wayne Jenkins — president of Orlando Health Physician Partners, the Orlando Health division that administers physician relations — supports the idea of physicians being in private practice and organizing.

"We don't find it threatening in any way, and we're not opposed," Jenkins said. "We've always expected some physicians would prefer to stay in private practice, and some would prefer to be acquired. It makes no sense for us not to work with private practitioners. They make up the majority of our medical staff."

Of the 2,000 doctors on Orlando Health's medical staff, 75 percent are independent, Jenkins said.

A spokeswoman for Florida Hospital said no executives were available to comment on the new physician association.

Florida Hospital has been actively acquiring area physician groups. On Jan. 1, the purchase of Florida Heart Group and its 19 formerly independent doctors took effect.

That same day, Orlando Health's purchase of Physician Associates, 95 mostly primary-care doctors, was official.

The trade association's mission, hammered out during a meeting of two dozen doctors last month, is to raise awareness among consumers, businesses and legislators about how hospital acquisitions of physician practices negatively affect health care, say organizers.

Costs will go up, and access will go down, they said.

As an example, for a standard heart-perfusion study, patients insured by Blue Cross Blue Shield would see a bill for \$468 if they went to an independent cardiologist. The patient's co-pay would be \$100, according to the insurer's Web site.

However, if that patient went to a hospital-employed cardiologist, the insurance company would pay \$760 for the same procedure. The patient's portion would be \$144, or 44 percent more.

Furthermore, "when hospitals employ physicians, they can control their referral pattern," said Thomas, "and channel them into the hospital's network," which can restrict patient choice.

Such concerns are "unfounded," Jenkins said.

"I hear similar complaints about not getting referrals from employed physicians," Jenkins said. "All the doctors think others are getting something they're not."

Already, 80 physicians have joined the local trade group. Although Thomas is not aware of any other such organizations in Florida, he knows of three others in the Southeast: two in Georgia, with a combined membership of more than 800, and one in Tennessee.

"We hope this is not just for our community, but for every community in the United States. They're all going through this," said Thomas, who has reached out to the other trade groups.

Any funds the association raises will go toward educating patients about the differences between independent and employed physicians, and toward hiring a lobbyist to represent independent physicians at the local, state and national level.

"The doctors are working full time and don't have the hours to fight this," said lobbyist Doron Gorshein of Gorshein Strategies, which will represent the group in Washington.

"We want to be sure the issues independent doctors are raising are heard," said Gorshein, "and part of the health-care debate moving forward."

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