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A GLOBAL CAMPAIGN PUTS THE SPOTLIGHT ON THE VITAL ROLE OF PRIMARY CARE DOCTORS IN CARING FOR THE POOR

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The first-ever global campaign to help restore the role of primary care providers as true family doctors was launched at the Vatican on November 16, 2023. A joint initiative of the Pontifical Academy for Life and SOMOS Community Care—a network of over 2,500 mostly primary care physicians serving over 1 Million Medicaid lives citywide—the campaign will collect signatures on all five continents to endorse a declaration in support of family doctors, urging that their role as family doctors be given new life as a crucial factor in providing quality, comprehensive, and preventative health care to those most in need.

The campaign will culminate in an international symposium at the Vatican on May 18, 2024, with the participation of Pope Francis. A statement by the campaign's sponsors describes the initiative as a "call to all social and political agents to join forces and put the relationship between the doctor and the patient at the center of our health systems again."

The declaration stresses the importance of rediscovering and restoring "the figure of the family doctor, a decisive factor in the humanization of our societies," something gravely lacking during the COVID-19 pandemic. The key is the family doctor's "relationship with the patient," which is at "the very heart of the healthcare model" as it has been practiced throughout history. However, there has been a misunderstanding of the "humanizing vocation of healthcare," and "many social workers and health practitioners" have embraced other priorities.

A strong "doctor-patient relationship," says the declaration, "forms the foundation of a healthcare system that adopts and prioritizes prevention and a holistic vision of health. The doctors, in that case, "accompany their patient and their patient's family, not only for the sake of the healthcare system but also for society itself." Without such a relationship, "healthcare is relegated to intervening only when the patient's situation has already degenerated," causing "very high human and social costs.

"The doctor-patient relationship," stresses the declaration, "constitutes an antidote for healthcare systems so they do not become conditioned to interests other than the health and well-being of citizens"—when, for example, they condition their objectives on the profit motive of people or companies within their sector." Pope Francis has spoken of healthcare systems "so bureaucratized and computerized that the elderly or poorly educated find themselves effectively excluded or marginalized."

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As things stand, poor and low-income Americans often have no clue who their primary care doctor is, let alone building a relationship with a doctor. That is the reality for patients stuck in the labyrinthine system that is traditional Medicaid.

A SOMOS press release summarized the campaign's objectives: "placing the patient-doctor relationship"—doctors forging "long-term relationships and deep trust with their patients"—"as a top priority in all aspects of the healthcare system; ... ensuring a healthcare system that prioritizes prevention and holistic health, given that current intervention-based models result in increased costs, loss of life and a broken system; and implementing commitments and initiatives toward a focus on the patient, rather than other interests that divert resources and politicize care."

SOMOS doctors exemplify the objectives of the declaration, with their work revolving around a doctor-patient relationship that is one of genuine trust and one that makes the doctors into community leaders who serve the good of all. SOMOS provides its doctors—serving some one million of the neediest Medicaid patients in New York City—with support that helps them excel in providing their patients with superior care.

SOMOS support includes the deployment of Community Health Workers who serve as doctors' eyes and ears in the community. They visit patients' homes, reminding them about medical appointments and taking medicine. They also report on conditions in the house and neighborhood, noting Social Determinants of Health, factors such as below-par housing, unemployment, etc., which can impact physical and behavioral health. Doctors sometimes engage Community-Based Organizations to help patients with their social issues.

The provider's comprehensive, detailed knowledge of a patient's circumstances and that of the family as a whole helps create this patient-doctor bond, as the patient feels known and cared for. This bond is further enhanced as many doctors live and work in the same neighborhoods as their patients, with whom, in many cases, they share a cultural and ethnic background. In this way, the SOMOS doctor promotes, as the declaration says, "a harmonious vision of health in the context of a healthy life, recognizing each person's intrinsic value and the decisive nature of family relationships."

Thanks to the patient-doctor bond of trust, the doctor is often able to intervene in a timely fashion in medical issues of their patients, offering preventive care—as called for by the declaration—that keeps, for example, chronic conditions like diabetes and hypertension, from getting out of hand. In reducing by 25 percent both unnecessary visits to the ER and unnecessary costly hospitalizations, SOMOS saved \$330M for New York State taxpayers. This achievement puts in sharp relief the costs incurred by a healthcare system that only intervenes when the patient is already sick.



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SOMOS doctors also serve as the patient's entry point into the healthcare system, coordinating various forms of care, such as behavioral treatment and visits to specialists. SOMOS doctors' practices are turned into Patient-Centered Medical Homes, portals for comprehensive care, with the primary care doctor tracking patients' progress and needs.

SOMOS got its start as an entity that was part of a New York State Medicaid experiment driven by the Value-Based Care formula, which stipulates that doctors are paid according to the longer-term health of their patients—the healthier the patients, the greater the doctors' compensation. VPB demonstrates that quality care can produce significant savings. It may be a model for other countries as they serve the poor.

SOMOS has succeeded in re-iterating the role of the family doctor as a trusted figure who cultivates a strong doctor-patient bond. The SOMOS model could succeed nationwide and even internationally. It is to be hoped that imaginative experimentation may be one result of the international campaign to restore the primary care physician as a genuine family doctor.

Mario Paredes is CEO of SOMOS Community Care, a network of over 2,500 network providers responsible for reaching and delivering care to over 1 Million Medicaid lives citywide.