

Kidney dialysis treatment makes house calls

WellBound lets patients treat at home, visit clinic to check-in

KATHY ROBERTSON | STAFF WRITER

Cynthia Snider's kidney problem became a work problem early this year when she started dialysis.

A postal worker in El Dorado Hills, she works from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Her doctor sent her to a dialysis clinic for treatment three times a week, but it's only open from 8 to 5, and dialysis takes four hours.

"I was usually done at 11 or 12 — and late to work," said Snider, who became the first patient at a new clinic in town that teaches patients how to do dialysis on their own at home.

WellBound, a Mountain View-based company that claims to be the first company in the nation to focus exclusively on pre-dialysis education and home dialysis treatment, opened its doors to Kaiser Permanente patients in June and now accepts the general public as well.

Because up to half the people on dialysis start treatment in the emergency room and are too sick to explore home options, the company also focuses on teaching patients with kidney problems about treatment alternatives early.

The 3,500-square-foot clinic is located behind Noah's Bagels in the Town & Country Village center at the corner of Fulton and Marconi avenues. It has four treatment rooms big enough to accommodate the patient and his or her partner over the six-week period it takes to learn how to do the procedure at home.

"Patients on home dialysis can lead near normal lives," said Marc Branson, WellBound's chief executive officer.

Center dialysis is done three times a week, and patients often have to quit their jobs and go on disability because their lives revolve around the treatments.

Home treatments are typically done six times a week, so there is less build-up of

toxins and they feel better. And they can control where and when they get it.

"I'm in control," Snider said. "I get to do it when I want. One day I worked until 8 and waited until the next day."

The treatment takes teamwork and is not for the faint of heart, but interest is growing.

8 PERCENT DO IT AT HOME

More than 19 million Americans have chronic kidney disease, according to the National Kidney Foundation.

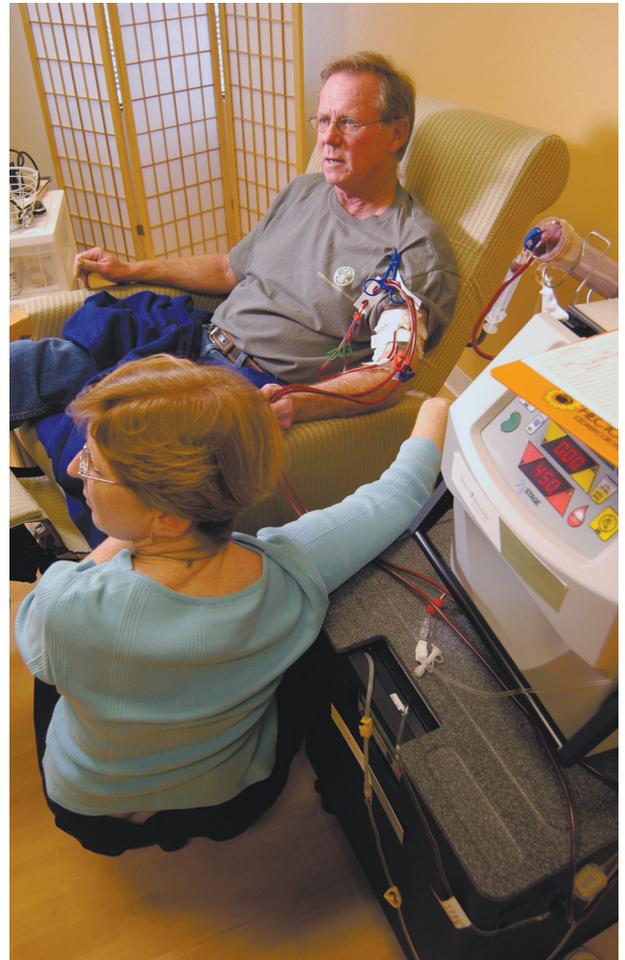
More than 300,000 Americans depend on dialysis, a treatment that removes waste and excess fluid from blood when kidneys are no longer able to do it on their own.

Millions more have diabetes and might eventually need treatment for end-stage kidney disease.

These figures and the rapidly aging population have boosted business interest in the dialysis market.

Home dialysis has been around since the 1970s, but the size of the machines and their extensive plumbing needs dampened interest. New technology has changed the situation to the point where some patients tote their machines onto airplanes or into the family recreational vehicle.

About 8 percent of dialysis treatment is done at home, but WellBound's Branson suggests the figure is unlikely to go much beyond 30 percent because many patients



DENNIS McCOY | SACRAMENTO BUSINESS JOURNAL

Teresa Brown learns how to administer dialysis treatment to her husband, Thomas, at the new WellBound clinic. The pair say home dialysis "was an easy decision," but "if you don't work together well, it's not going to happen." Thomas Brown says daily at-home treatment has improved his energy and mental acuity.

are too sick or don't have a partner at home to help.

That still leaves a significant business opportunity.

At least one other national company already offers home dialysis care in Greater Sacramento. El Segundo-based DaVita has

DIALYSIS | Kaiser leads the market

a home dialysis clinic on Manzanita Avenue in Carmichael and just opened a second in West Sacramento, company spokeswoman Jerah Marquardt said.

KAISER MOVES AHEAD OF THE MARKET

WellBound is partnering with Kaiser Permanente on its local clinic, prompted by success working together at a clinic in Emeryville that opened in 2005.

Two Kaiser kidney doctors serve as medical directors of the clinic, where patients learn how to use the equipment and come in for checkups to monitor their progress.

An integrated health plan and healthcare system, Kaiser focuses keeping patients out of the hospital. Patients on home dialysis are less likely to have complications that

require hospitalization. Kaiser has upped its use of home dialysis to 22 percent, far higher than average.

The WellBound model also jibes with Kaiser's education focus. Classes offered at the center are intended to help pre-dialysis patients maintain health and potentially delay dialysis, said Dr. Jignesh Patel, one of the medical directors.

Training is extensive, but Thomas and Teresa Brown are going for the flexibility home dialysis offers.

An accountant who works for the state, Thomas had renal failure in 1990 due to an autoimmune disease, but he got a kidney transplant a year later. He did well until he got cancer in 2005, had to go off the transplant drugs and lost the kidney. He's been on dialysis for a year.

Teresa Brown has training in veterinary medicine but works at Kaiser's South Sacramento hospital in member services. They are a comfortable pair willing to work together, some ribbing aside.

"I set the needles — and he doesn't bite," she quips. "But if you don't work together well, it's not going to happen."

Thomas Brown prefers dialysis every day. He has more energy and hopes to start running again soon. His mental acuity is better and he gets away with eating some of the foods forbidden on his "if it tastes good, spit it out" dialysis diet.

"This was an easy decision for us," he said.

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