

## PRIVATE MEDICAL CARE: Medical consultants

### They'll spell out all your options

ALEXANDRA SHIMO

Confused by all the possibilities? You are not alone -- which is partly why MedExtra came into existence. In 1997, the company's founder, Dr. Jeffrey Brock, was working as an emergency room doctor in Montreal. A friend was having a hard time sorting out a medical problem in the public system -- he was being passed from doctor to doctor and wasn't getting the treatment he needed. As a personal favour, Brock took his case on, and agreed to work as an unofficial medical consultant.

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Brock used his inside knowledge of the health care system to find out which doctors were best suited to treat his friend and to help him book the appointments he needed. When other people had similar problems accessing health care, he helped them too. Demand for his expertise quickly spread, and in 2001, Brock stopped working full-time as a doctor to launch MedExtra. To date, he has assisted more than 5,000 Canadians.

One of the reasons patients on their own don't get the care they need, he says, is because doctors don't have the information they require at their fingertips: scans are often mislaid and pertinent information is not always transferred from one doctor to another. Nor, he adds, do doctors always have time to dig out synopses from five years ago, or decipher pages of illegible physician scrawl. MedExtra takes care of these details: it gathers the relevant medical information, interviews the patient, and summarizes his case history in a few pages of notes. Doctors are faxed a "care management overview" with every appointment, so even an overworked doctor can get a full picture of the patient's health in just a few minutes.

The MedExtra team says it keeps abreast of the latest medical breakthroughs and knows which doctors are using the most advanced techniques. Clients are told about new drugs that are just hitting the market. The company has even imported medications for cancer patients that are not yet available in the public system.

MedExtra lets patients know what their public and private options are, in Canada and the U. S. Pri-vate care across the border is almost always more expensive than private medicine in this country, Brock says. "We do whatever we can in Canada, so it's either covered under medicare, or it's done privately in Montreal at a fraction of the U.S. cost." Brock says Canadians pay higher prices in U.S. hospitals than Americans. (U.S. insurance companies buy medical care at a discounted rate and some of this is passed on to their clients.) "So," he says, "the danger is that when you go down to a U.S. hospital and pay for everything yourself, you are going to end up with a very big bill. You might as well hand them a blank cheque."

**PRICES:** Patients can pay by the hour, or they can purchase a membership.

Price per hour: \$180.

Individual membership: \$250 to \$500 a year.

Corporate membership: \$4 to \$50 a month per employee.

Membership buys a consultant's time -- more expensive plans allow more time with the consultant. Another membership perk is savings on the cost of private health care in Canada and the U.S. MedExtra has relationships with 4,000 health care facilities across North America, Brock says, and is able to access discount rates for patients.

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