

## An ounce of prevention

Cardiogenix is a private service that aims to treat patients before they get sick

BY STEPHANIE WHITTAKER, FREELANCE FEBRUARY 16, 2010



Cardiogenix, co-founded by physician Ashok Oommen, offers a number of programs, including one in which doctors work out alongside cardiac patients.

**Photograph by:** DAVE SIDAWAY, THE GAZETTE, Freelance

Imagine you're recovering from a heart attack. You decide to work on improving your health. So you visit your doctor, who, after an examination, arms you with a new dietary regimen and a thrice-weekly exercise program.

If your physician happens to be Ashok Oommen, don't even think about weaseling out of the workouts he's prescribed, because he'll be in the gym, exercising with you.

Working out with his cardiac patients is but one of many services Oommen offers through his company, Cardiogenix, a private medical service that focuses on wellness. Founded in 2006 by four partners, two of them doctors, the company fills a gap in the public health system.

"When you're critically ill, you get state-of-the-art care in the Canadian medical system," Oommen said.

"But medicare was never set up with prevention in mind. We've trained doctors to take care of patients when they get sick."

Taking care of sick patients is what led Oommen to create Cardiogenix. After graduation from McGill University's medical school, he completed a residency in family medicine and then another in emergency medicine.

Working in three Montreal-area emergency rooms, he would witness heart attacks and strokes daily.

"We can stabilize the patients and save lives, but what bothered me most was that there had been a 10-year window in which the risk factors were accumulating in the patients' bodies without symptoms," he said.

Oommen also noticed that heart attack victims were getting younger. "I treated a 33-year-old man for a heart attack two years ago," he said.

Doctors lack time to educate their patients about disease prevention, he says.

Cardiogenix opened in a Décarie Blvd. office building with a view to help patients prevent the five leading causes of death: heart attack, stroke, cancer, diabetes and obesity.

For a monthly fee ranging from \$50 to \$200, depending on the service they buy, patients can have access to a family doctor around the clock and various auxiliary services.

Oommen says patients are often stunned at the amount of time they're given during the initial visit.

"We do a six-hour evaluation. It starts with a 90-minute session with a nurse, who does the blood tests, and a blood pressure test that uses a digital ankle-brachial index machine, which measures pressure in the arms and legs simultaneously."

Discrepancies in blood flow can signal a blockage in a blood vessel, he said. Patients then spend an hour with a doctor before being evaluated by the rest of the team.

The six-hour checkup enables Cardiogenix to assess each patient's risk factors.

"My first question to patients is always: 'How long do you want to live?' They're taken aback," Oommen said. "Most people think they don't have a choice. They think heart attacks and diabetes are random, but they're not."

The clinic offers 15 programs. At the low end of the scale, a monthly fee of \$50 buys a basic annual checkup that comes with a 20-page report on the patient's state of health. Alternatively, the same fee will buy access to a family doctor without the annual evaluation.

For \$150 a month, users of the service get access to a family physician around the clock and a six-hour annual checkup and health assessment.

Oommen said the company set up a cardiac rehabilitation program after cardiologists began referring patients who had suffered heart attacks. It is in this program that the Cardiogenix doctors work out three times a week with their patients at a local YMCA.

The program costs \$140 a month and includes the gym workouts and three one-on-one meetings with a fitness specialist. Participants wear heart-rate monitors "and the doctor and nurse are there to monitor them," Oommen said. "I'm on the bike and the minute we see someone having chest pain, we're there to gauge whether it's cardiac or muscular from exertion."

The dearth of family physicians in Quebec has driven business to the clinic, although Oommen will not reveal how many patients Cardiogenix has or what its annual revenues are. He says, however, the program that gives users access around the clock to a family doctor is one of the most popular.

And far from undermining the medicare system, Oommen says, his clinic's business model supports it.

"We deal with things that public clinics don't want to deal with. I had a patient who had amputated the tip of his finger and, because we're all emergency doctors, we took care of him and gave him follow-up wound care."

The clinic also does diagnostics, referring patients to partner facilities.

"If you need an MRI, we'll send you to the best facility to get it," Oommen said. "They can have it done in either the private or public system."

He says the average heart he sees in the clinic is 12 years older biologically than its owner's chronological age.

"We're all born with the potential to live to 100, but we subtract up to 20 years," he says. "This is what gets me going in the morning."

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