

WHERE I STAND

Independent medical practices matter more than ever

By Margaret Chustecki

In today's health care landscape, it's getting harder to tell who's actually in charge of patient care: doctors, or the corporations that employ them.

Across the country, we're seeing a rapid shift — more and more medical practices are being bought up by hospital systems, insurance companies, or private equity firms. These entities may bring financial resources and scale, but they also bring something else: a focus on revenue that can compromise the quality, independence, and humanity of the care patients receive.

As a practicing independent primary care physician and a member of Southern New England Healthcare (SoNE HEALTH), a physician-led network in Connecticut, I believe there's a better way forward—one that puts patients and doctors back at the center of health care.

Unlike corporate-run organizations, SoNE HEALTH is owned and governed by practicing physicians. That means clinical decisions are made by those who actually see and treat patients—not by executives prioritizing profit margins. It's a structure that protects professional judgment and helps ensure that the care we provide is based on medical need, not financial return.

Independent medical practices like mine offer something too rare in today's system: time, attention and personalized care. As independent physicians we are not beholden to quotas or pressured to move patients through the door quickly. We can, and do, build real relationships with our patients, taking the time to listen and tailor care to the unique needs of each person who walks through our doors.

But practicing independently doesn't mean practicing alone. Networks like ours give us access to tools that are typically only available within large systems—data analytics, care coordination support and resources to participate in value-based care, among others. These shared services allow us to maintain autonomy while still delivering high-quality, efficient care in a system that increasingly favors consolidation.

And let's be clear: the trend toward consolidation is troubling. When large hospital systems or private investors take over community practices, costs often go up, but care doesn't necessarily improve. Studies show that services cost more when performed in hospital-owned facilities. Worse, these systems often pressure physicians to refer only within their network, regardless of what's best for the patient.

Private equity's growing involvement in healthcare raises even more concerns. These firms are typically focused on short-term returns, not long-term patient outcomes. That often means cost-cutting at the expense of care—shorter visits, fewer staff, and pressure to increase volume, not value.

This shift isn't just affecting patients. It is also wearing down doctors.

Physician burnout is now a national crisis, and much of it stems from loss of control. Excessive administrative demands, productivity pressures and rigid protocols have disconnected many physicians from the reasons they entered medicine in the first place.

Independent practice offers a way back. It gives physicians the freedom to shape their work around their values, their patients and their community. When we can control our schedules, make clinical decisions based on experience and ethics and build long-term relationships with patients, the work becomes meaningful again. That isn't just good for doctors—it's good for patients and for the sustainability of our entire healthcare system.

So what does a better model look like?

It looks like value-based care—an approach that prioritizes outcomes over volume. Instead of rewarding physicians for doing more tests or procedures, value-based care rewards prevention, coordination and real improvements in health. Patients benefit from a collaborative approach to care, one that allows for more personalized attention and better communication with their doctor. Physicians benefit from incentives that align with what we've been trained to do — and want to do, which is help people live healthier lives.

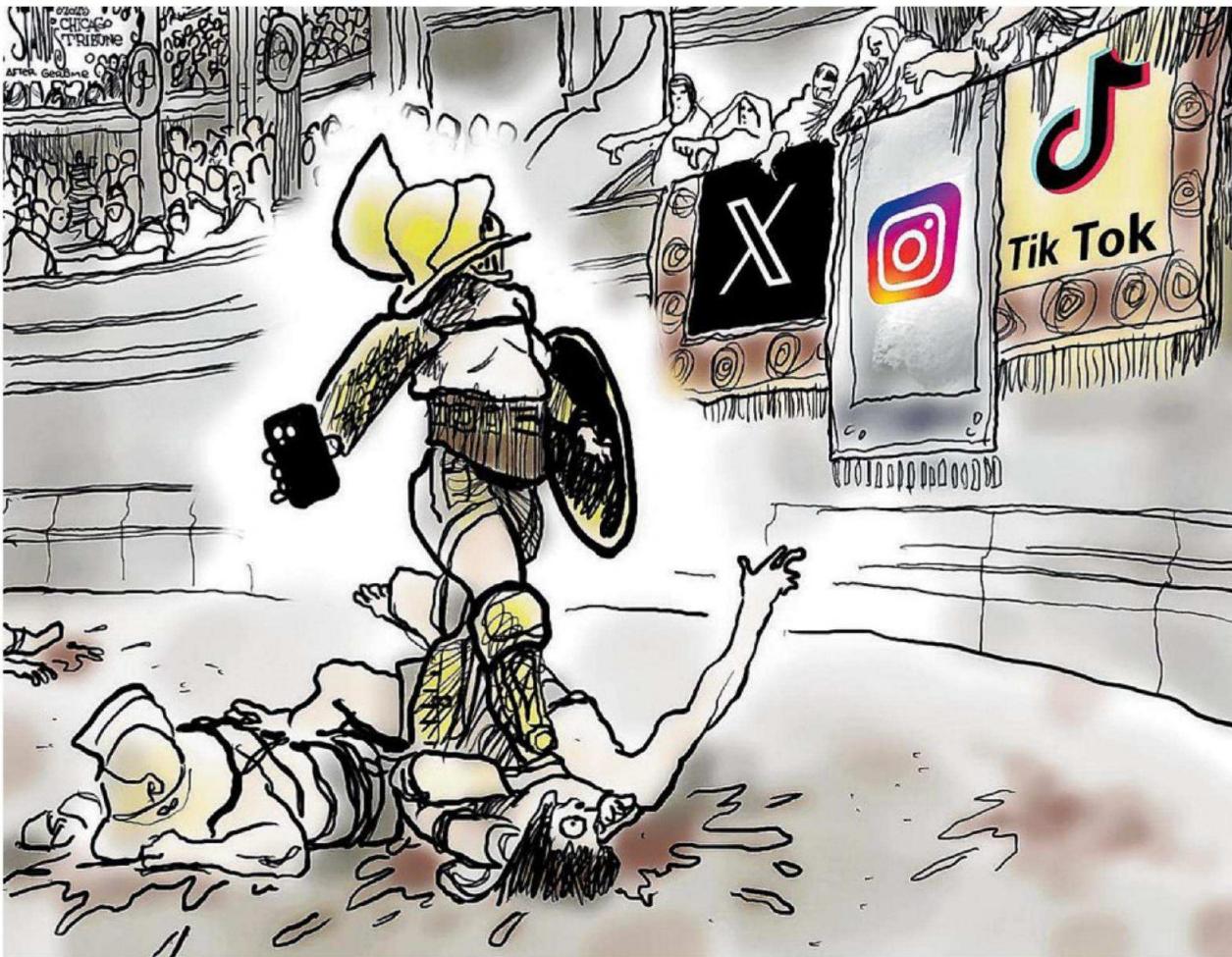
Transitioning to this model requires the right infrastructure—data tools, population health programs and quality improvement systems that many small practices can't afford on their own. That's where independent networks come in. By banding together, independent practices can meet the demands of modern healthcare while preserving the values that matter most.

We don't need more bureaucracy in medicine. We need more trust — between doctors and patients, and between professionals working together toward a common goal. Independent, physician-led networks help restore that trust. They give doctors a voice in how care is delivered. They give patients more choices. And they give communities a health care model rooted in accountability, compassion, and long-term thinking.

The health care system isn't just about hospitals or insurers. At its heart, it's about people—patients who deserve to be seen, heard and compassionately cared for by physicians empowered to deliver care with purpose and integrity in a trusting relationship with their patients.

To nurture that relationship and restore joy and integrity to the practice of medicine, we need to protect space for independent physicians to thrive.

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AI keeps trying to hire me



JOE PISANI
DID I SAY THAT?

I woke up precisely at 5:09 a.m. on Monday with Tony the Tiger's voice ringing in my head: "It's gonna be a GREAT day." Or maybe it was Barbra Streisand's. Anyway, something was in the air, and I had great expectations.

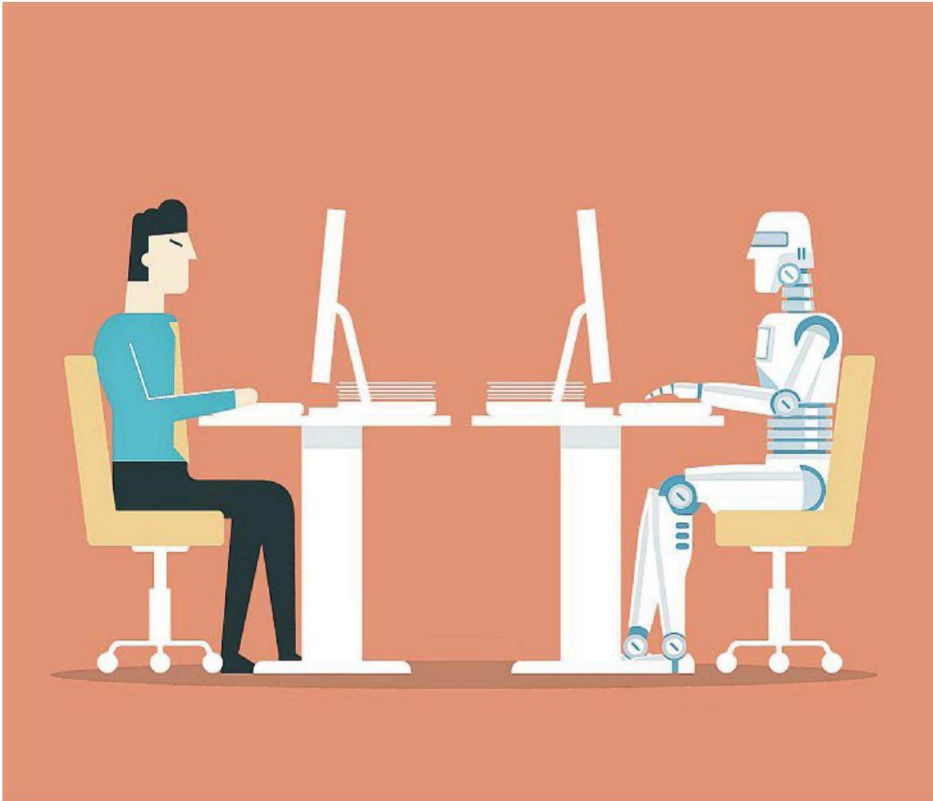
I checked the weather. Cloudy with chance of showers. I checked the driveway. No overnight thefts, and the car was still there. I checked the front door. Nothing from Amazon. I checked my email. Nada. I checked my pulse. Still ticking. I checked my junk email. There were tons of offers from Russian girls who want dates, there were come-ons for easy loans, and there were personal tips on how to preserve my prostate. I checked my voice messages. The dentist's office called to make sure I'd come to my appointment 15 minutes early and reminded me to brush my teeth and please use mouthwash. Anything for my dental hygienist.

Where was my big surprise?

Then, I checked my text messages and found it. A job offer. In case you're interested in applying, this is what it said:

"Good morning! I'm Tiffany Bacciagalupe, a recruitment representative from LinkedIn. Your resume has been recommended by online recruitment companies. Therefore, our company is offering you a fantastic remote job opportunity. This is an online position that involves helping TikTok or YouTube creators enhance video metrics, increase visibility, and boost views, along with providing free training."

Tiffany said the work hours were flexible, and I could earn from \$50 to \$500 daily. The base salary was \$7,000, plus a performance bonus up to \$5,000. I'd get paid leave,



sorbetto/Getty Images

along with maternity and paternity leave, which I suspect would pay as much as jury duty.

She even gave me a phone number to call, but I'm not giving it out because I don't want too much competition. It's hard enough finding a job when you're a geezer.

I confess I'm always suspicious of people named Tiffany or Brittany or Joe, and I was suspicious that Tiffany might actually be one of those artificial intelligence programs and not a real person, who has to occasionally shower, brush her teeth and hopefully use mouthwash.

Second, I haven't updated my resume since I considered applying for a job in the Obama White House as window washer. I was sure I'd get that one, and it'd give me more job security than a career in journalism (there are a lot of windows). So how the heck did the recruitment companies get my resume, not to mention my phone number, my email address, my medical files and my arrest record?

Third, what's TikTok? A Chinese clock manufacturer? OK, I know what TikTok is, and I don't like it although I use YouTube from time to time, but stay as far away from social media as I can for mental health reasons.

The salary isn't all that great, but a guy's gotta

work and make some extra scratch in retirement to pay for the simple pleasures in life — an occasional smoke, cannabis, a cocktail or two or 10, a trip to the casino and other assorted bad habits. Actually, I don't do any of that. I use my extra scratch to buy organic kale and mushroom coffee at Whole Foods, per orders of my spouse.

I don't think I could use the maternity leave, but I'd apply for paternity leave as the occasion requires.

Tiffany was persistent and kept sending me job offers. This isn't the first time I've gotten unsolicited offers. For months, and I really mean months, I was getting hundreds of emails with story ideas from companies and organizations that wanted me to write about them, like the Caribou Maine Chamber of Commerce, which was holding its annual reindeer parade and gala.

You see, all these story pitches were supposed to go to "Joseph Pisani," a real journalist who works for the Wall Street Journal, but the janitor or artificial intelligence director at Cision, or one of those public relations data bases, plugged in my address instead of his, and I started getting pestered by PR people from around the world who thought I was him.

I kept telling them I

was the wrong guy, but they didn't listen or maybe didn't understand. (Were they AI too?) I told them: "The guy you want is Joseph. I'm just plain ole joe, spelled j-o-e, with a lowercase j. Plus, I know nothing about business reporting, and my wife has to balance my checkbook ... so cease and desist and stop asking me to write about finance, corporate America, quarterly earnings, high tech and low tech."

(If that Joseph Pisani guy got this job offer too, I don't want to compete with him.)

In conclusion, I urge all you people in Readerville to check your text messages. If you got the same offer, I'll see you at orientation. Just ask for joe with a small j. Tiffany will bring the doughnuts.

And in conclusion a second time, I leave you with this thought: In the inimitable and uplifting words of Barbara Streisand, and not Tony the Tiger: "When you're down and out, lift up your head and shout, 'It's gonna be a GREAT day.' Angels in the sky promise that by and by, there's gonna be a GREAT day."

So carpe diem today ... and every day you have left on this planet.

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