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New pediatrics office opens in Winchester

By MOLLY WILLIAMS The Winchester Star
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Dr. Deborah Dunn has opened Barefoot Pediatrics at 3042 Valley Ave., suite 107, in Winchester, where she uses a subscription model for customers to pay for services instead of traditional insurance. Dunn is a former pediatric hospitalist at Winchester Medical Center.

Jeff Taylor/The Winchester Star

Local pediatrician Deborah Dunn has opened a new practice in Winchester where she aims to offer low-barrier access to quality pediatric care.

Barefoot Pediatrics, a direct primary care office located on Valley Avenue, has been a longtime goal of Dunn's.

Now that its doors are officially open, she's excited to get to work.

"I think the thing I'm most looking forward to," said Dunn, "is just building relationships with families."

Dunn has been a pediatrician for 25 years, 15 of which she spent at Front Royal Pediatrics.

For the past seven years, she's worked part-time as a pediatric hospitalist at Winchester Medical Center while homeschooling her children.

Her youngest child graduated in May, right around the time that Winchester-based Valley Health announced operational changes at Winchester Medical Center, which included terminating its contracts with Emergency Medicine of Blue Ridge and Sound Physicians, which provide emergency department doctors and hospitalists, respectively.

SCP Health is expected to take over the employment of emergency medicine providers beginning Sept. 30 at all six Valley Health hospitals, Valley Health announced this past spring. It will then take over hospitalists' employment at the start of 2027.

"My job is ending in November," said Dunn. "And so instead of, like, looking into working with a new contracting group, I decided to do what I've been wanting to do."

She opened the Barefoot Pediatrics practice on Aug. 10 and moved into her new space on Tuesday.

Barefoot Pediatrics is a direct primary care practice, which means there's no insurance involved.

Instead, families pay a monthly membership fee, which includes sick visits, video calls, phone calls and texting with Dunn, who is the sole provider.

She has an agreement with Corey Boxwell at Boxwell Pharmacy in Winchester, where he can order vaccines through patients' insurance that Dunn can then administer during visits.

"If [patients] don't have insurance," she said, "then they can get [vaccines] at the health department for free."

Dunn sees benefits to the direct primary care model when it comes to the quality of patient care.

"It's probably not a surprise to anyone to say our healthcare system is pretty broken, and when people want to see their doctor, it takes a while to get an appointment," she said.

There are phone calls and logistics involved, and when you finally get in for an appointment, "it's usually a really quick visit because, in order to keep the lights on in a practice, they have to see 25 to 35 patients a day," said Dunn.

"Insurance companies require so many things of the doctors, of the practice," she continued. "... So the doctors are frustrated. The patients are frustrated. It's not that the doctors aren't trying. They are. But they're all frustrated. And so, in this model, just kick them (insurance companies) out."

Eliminating that factor means that Dunn doesn't have to hire people to do paperwork.

It also means patients can send her photos of, say, a rash on a child to see if it warrants an in-person visit.

She can also be available in emergency situations to evaluate whether a trip to the hospital is necessary.

"In the typical insurance model, the doctor only gets paid for a visit in-person," Dunn said. "... And so they end up having you come in for everything, even just to tell you that something is normal, which is justified because they deserve to be paid for their services. But it's not convenient for anyone."

The direct care model also allows practitioners to keep their patient lists small.

Where a traditional office may have 2,000 to 3,000 patients, Dunn is aiming to keep her list to about 200 patients.

The monthly fee at Barefoot Pediatrics is \$100 for the first child, then \$50 for siblings and a family cap of \$250 per month.

"With this model, we do recommend that people have some kind of coverage for big emergencies," said Dunn. "So it works well with a high deductible insurance."

She added that many people who use this model also use a "health share."

"So they don't pay for everything, but they are there for big things," she said. "So it's a cheaper way to afford care than a traditional insurance."

As for how this model impacts things like prescriptions and imaging, Dunn said "a lot of times, you can actually get cash prices for those services that are cheaper than what your copay would be if you use insurance."

"Because I belong to a group purchasing organization that does this for direct primary care practices, you can get cash prices for labs and imaging and stuff that are often much cheaper than if you use your insurance," she said. "But if you prefer to use your insurance, you can totally do that for those things as well."

Dunn also plans on dedicating a third of her practice to serving low-income families at a rate of \$10 per month. These patients will have access to the same level of care.

"I really did go into medicine to serve the poor," she said. "Like, that's really what I want to do, and it's harder to do than you would think, just because of the healthcare system."

She said there won't be any process to verify low-income status other than a family's word that they are in need.

"This practice really comes out of my Christian faith, and I feel the Lord has blessed this, and this is His project," said Dunn. "... And so if someone decides to take advantage of this, that's between them and God."

For low-income families in particular, Dunn said that being able to get a doctor's appointment quickly can be helpful.

Her smaller patient list will also make her available for longer appointments, she said, which she also believes will be beneficial.

"There's plenty of time to educate and to explain and to help understand," she said. "... A lot of families that are low-income end up in the emergency room because they just don't have a person to get a hold of. So I would love to be able to be that person."

Asked what she thinks Barefoot Pediatrics will bring to the local healthcare landscape, Dunn said she thinks "that it can really help with a relationship of trust."

"That's one of the big problems we have right now is nobody trusts the healthcare system, especially, you know, post-COVID," she said.

Oftentimes, she said, people might not feel heard by their healthcare providers due to insurance or time constraints.

"I have time to hear what your concerns are," she said. "If people can build a relationship of trust, then they can let their guard down a little bit and be willing to hear information, and I can learn from them, and they can learn from me, and I think that's huge right now."

Dunn also noted that she is trained in acupuncture and is continuing to learn about "alternatives to only Western medicine."

"I love Western medicine," she said. "I'm fully trained in that, but there's other options, too, and other systems that ... have a lot to offer."

Additionally, she said she's willing to take patients who are under- or unvaccinated.

"Most of the pediatricians in town require fairly strict adherence to the recommended vaccine schedule, which is totally justified," she said. "If you have a busy waiting room, you can't have people giving measles to each other in the waiting room."

However, since Barefoot Pediatrics is small, she won't have a waiting room in her office, which she said gives her more flexibility in working with these families.

"I do think that because of the breakdown in trust, that it's a little bit difficult to say to people before you have a relationship with them, 'You have to do this before we're going to talk,'" she said.

Dunn said she "encourages vaccines," and that she believes they're "a really important part of pediatric care."

"But I also think that parents are grown-ups, and they're the ones that have to live with the consequences of their decisions," she said. "... I'm not really interested in having families come who are like, 'I don't want to talk about it,' but as long as we're able to have a respectful conversation, then they're the ones that are going to make the decisions."

As she moves into the next stage of her career, Dunn said she's looking forward to building relationships and watching kids grow.

"I have already had visits with a couple of families who have said, 'You know, this is such a better experience than a typical doctor experience,'" she said. "And I just love that, to help people not be afraid of the doctor. Kids, you know, not be afraid of the doctor, and be able to feel like this is a good thing."

Barefoot Pediatrics is located at 3042 Valley Ave., suite 107, in Winchester.

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