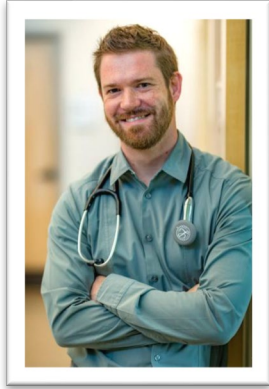




Right Care Interviews

with Dr. Kendra Emery, CMO



Tom Johnson, MD – MaineHealth Primary Care – Family and Internal Medicine – Norway



Kendra: Can you share a little about yourself?

Tom: I am a family medicine physician and have been practicing in Norway for the last 10 years.

Kendra: A key goal of value-based care is providing the right care at the right time and at the right place for each individual patient. How do you see your work contributing to this goal?

Tom: I think that primary care is the foundation of our medical system. I've always seen value-based care as an important endeavor for primary care because, if we think of value as quality over cost, those are two things that lie at the heart of what primary care providers do. We strive to provide higher quality care to patients at a lower cost.

So, in many ways, value is something we're already thinking about on a daily basis. Formalizing value-based care through contracts and being mindful of it in our day-to-day work will only increase recognition of the role and importance of primary care.

Kendra: How are you uniquely positioned to provide the right care for your patients?

Tom: When it comes to delivering the right care, in the right place, at the right time—we're well positioned to do that. Ideally, we've developed strong, trusting relationships with our patients, where they feel comfortable with our recommendations. We also have more longitudinal relationships—we know our patients over time. And often, I find myself saying to a patient, "Here's the context I can offer for the concern you're bringing in today," based on our shared history. It's something they might not see clearly in the moment because they're experiencing symptoms, but I can reflect that bigger picture back to them.

Here at Stephens specifically, we have an amazing ER—they do great work, they're excellent communicators, and our patients consistently tell us how impressed they are with the care they receive. But I think everyone would agree: if a patient comes to me for an issue, I've treated them for before, I'm likely in a better position to manage that problem at a lower cost and with less overall utilization than the ER, simply because of that ongoing relationship. Our ER does a great job of referring patients that need primary care to us, and that's important for the community and for the health system.

Kendra: What's important to you about the medical community that you practice in?

Tom: I think we've always had a really strong culture of communication here. That's one of the strengths of a small hospital—good communication. I always feel comfortable reaching out to our local specialists, and I know they reach out to me when needed. That collaboration is incredibly important.

That said, I also value being part of MaineHealth Medical Group, which has made major efforts to improve access to specialty care for primary care providers. Our eConsults are fantastic—they've expanded significantly, and I hope we continue to grow that resource. Patients love

being able to get input from a specialist through someone they already trust, without needing to travel unless truly necessary.

MaineHealth has also done a great job bringing more specialists into our community. Over the past 10 years, we've seen expanded cardiology, ENT, psychiatry, pulmonology, and surgical services. It's been a huge benefit to our patients—to get the care they need close to home without having to leave the community.

Kendra: What is one of the biggest opportunities you see right now for improving care?

Tom: Right now, I see the Medical Group as a tremendous opportunity—it's been run extremely well, with strong support for primary care. Continuing to harness tools like eConsults can help reduce wait times for specialists while still providing valuable support to primary care providers.

In my role as Associate Medical Director of High Value Care, I'm also working with the Value-Based Care Committee to push this work forward, especially around care variation and utilization reduction, which I believe is critical in primary care. We're focusing on high-risk patients and doing a lot with chronic kidney disease management, as well as expanding access for hospital follow-up visits to help reduce readmissions. In our office, we've invested in the care team model. I partner closely with nurse practitioner Danica Best, along with another NP as needed, our nurse Cindy, a strong group of MAs, and Joey, our PSR, who is proactive about inpatient outreach and coordination. Having a well-integrated care team ensures that everyone is engaged in caring for the patient—really embodying that patient-centered medical home model where the patient is at the center, surrounded by a team working together to support them.

Kendra: What sparks joy for you in your work?

Tom: I truly enjoy caring for people long-term and building those trusting connections. Here in Western Maine, especially in family medicine, we have a phenomenal team of providers and staff. I honestly can't imagine working anywhere else, because I don't think I'd find the same level of support and connection with coworkers. Those relationships—both with patients and with colleagues—are what bring me joy every day.

Kendra: What do you think patients appreciate the most about the care that they receive?

Tom: One thing I've found is that patients truly appreciate when you come to a visit prepared—but still take the time to really listen. I start almost every visit the same way: I've made a plan in my head, but the moment I walk in, I set it aside and say, "Hey, is there anything you want to talk about?" That simple approach—being ready, but open—goes a long way in building trust and making patients feel heard.

Kendra: What do you enjoy doing outside of work?

Tom: I love skiing, and in the summer, I really enjoy exercising. We usually sign up for a few races each year, mostly 10Ks and half marathons. I've never done a full marathon and probably never will, but I do love running. I have two kids who are about to turn 10, and they're both really into sports. They play soccer and love going to the fields to practice, especially in the spring and summer, and I enjoy being part of that with them. As for reading and watching, my wife and I are currently working our way through the Barbara Kingsolver books—we had read some of them when we were younger, and it's been fun to revisit them together.