

Big Island Docs: Today's Marcus Welbys

By SUSAN MOCHIZUKI | Published Sunday, March 28, 2021, 12:05 a.m.

"Marcus Welby, M.D." aired from 1969-76. Dr. Welby was the private small-practice doctor who took care of patients with straightforward honesty and dedicated compassion. He made house calls, knew his patients on a first-name basis and handled a range of conditions.

His effectiveness had as much to do with his professional expertise as his personalized connection to his patients.

Formerly known as East Hawaii I.P.A., often mistaken for the name of a craft beer, our association is comprised of more than 50 current-day Dr. Welbys and changed our name to Big Island Docs. We represent a kaleidoscope of private individual practitioners who are part of the community and know their patients, their families and caregivers. Like Dr. Welby, some continue to make house calls to accommodate patients unable to travel to their appointments.

The association decided that changing its name to Big Island Docs would help our community recognize this collective of private sector providers caring for almost 50,000 Hawaii Island residents. Your doctor is probably one of these physicians, 90% who serve the east side of Hawaii Island.

The group is considered a statewide leader with higher than national HEDIS quality performance scores year after year. Big Island Docs physicians were the first to trial HMSA's innovative payment transformation capitated payment reimbursement model. Many of our physicians also participated in the prestigious and selective Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services' Comprehensive Primary Care Plus program.

Throughout the country, Dr. Welbys have become endangered species. Rising health care costs, complicated reimbursement systems, increasing regulations and rapid technological innovations have made it difficult for smaller private practice physicians to survive. Hospitals and larger entities are increasingly delivering outpatient care even in rural areas like ours. Larger groups are better equipped to manage the administrative challenges but tend to have more provider turnover and less

flexibility. Our private physicians are small-business owners who are burdened with adjusting to these demands while fulfilling their long-term commitment to patients and associated ohana.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, government resources whether personal protective equipment or special funding, continues to flow to larger health care institutions. Our docs were on the front line caring for patients and keeping them out of the hospital, yet needed to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps — scrambling to buy PPE on their own, complying with infection control protocols, implementing telehealth solutions without an IT department and changing their internal workflows. The majority kept their doors open throughout this ordeal, regardless of the risk to themselves and their staff.

Big Island Docs recognizes that due to retirements and the increasing complexity of the health care delivery system, our Dr. Marcus Welby network needs to change with the times. The organization, with the blessing of its physician members, started the Big Island Healthcare clinic, a private group whose mission is to deliver compassionate care of the highest quality with the best customer service. The purpose is to have the best of both worlds: personalized aloha care with the financial, management and operational infrastructure characteristic of larger systems.

Big Island Docs have survived tsunamis, lava flows and the COVID-19 pandemic, continuing their commitment to the community. Their survival will keep health care local, support our Hawaii Island economy, offer patients a choice of provider and deliver the excellent care that our community deserves.

Susan Mochizuki is executive director of Big Island Docs (formerly East Hawaii Independent Physicians Association).

Community First serves as a neutral forum for the community to come together and as a catalyst for solutions to improve health and lower medical costs on Hawaii Island.