

VIEWPOINTS

## The Team Approach to Healthcare: An Interview With Wellness Coach Sharon Benedict

Kimberly Lord Stewart

*Physicians no longer need be alone in their quest to help patients with major lifestyle changes such as smoking cessation, weight loss, fitness goals, and dietary changes. Wellness coaches can play a supportive role in an integrative health team to encourage and motivate patients toward permanent change. IMCJ asked Sharon Benedict, a wellness coach in San Antonio, Texas, to share her insights.*

**IMCJ:** While many people have heard of job coaches and even life coaches, wellness coaching is a new subject that has particular relevance to healthcare practitioners. What is a wellness coach?

**Ms Benedict:** A wellness coach is a proactive advocate and ally for the client. Since wellness involves many lifestyle factors, wellness coaching engages the client's whole life. A wellness coach is a professional ally who stands with the client as she commits to making significant lifestyle changes.

Yet, while acting as such a wellness coach, we don't see ourselves as "the expert" in our clients' lives: Only the client really knows what he wants and when he's ready to make a change. One of the most important skills for a wellness coach is the ability to help clients build confidence in their own capacities to embrace their core values and reach their goals. Wellness coaches also help patients reflect on any self-defeating behaviors—then help them break through any destructive mindsets and barriers to achieve lasting behavioral changes.

**IMCJ:** Can you explain how a wellness coach acts as a patient's agent for behavioral change? And how does this help with patient compliance?

**Ms Benedict:** In the role of behavioral change agent, wellness coaches are the voices that support clients in knowing they are fully capable of deciding what they want and how to get there. The coaching process helps a client discover his own path to wellness. For instance, although practitioners offer straightforward advice and counsel toward losing weight or smoking ces-

sation, patients can still struggle with guilt and discouragement—not to mention with difficulty in staying motivated long enough to make lasting behavioral changes.

Information alone doesn't do the job. As well intentioned as we are, we all get sidetracked by stresses and dissatisfaction in other areas of life. The benefit of a coach is being able to offer a positive and proactive way for the client to find his own solutions by acting as an advocate for motivation and accountabili-

ty. For example, a physician may prescribe exercising 4 times per week. The most common scenario tells us, however, that people are routinely challenged to find ways to do just that in their very busy, hectic, and financially strapped lifestyles—let alone adhere to other recommendations, such as dietary changes and stress challenges. With wellness coaching, achieving and sustaining compliance and lasting change becomes possible.

**IMCJ:** Are there areas of medicine in which wellness coaching is particularly useful?

**Ms Benedict:** Definitely. Prevention, wellness, and longevity are primary focus areas for many wellness and healthcare

centers today. Although most primarily involve such physical aspects of health as weight control, exercise, nutrition, smoking cessation, and stress management, more centers are realizing that no lasting change for the better can occur without also overcoming lifestyle barriers to wellness. That is to say, for people to be truly healthy, they also need to resolve issues such as the balance between work and life, any lack of a personal life/wellness vision, low overall life satisfaction, high stress, limited family and workplace support, and financial constraints—to name just a few! A coach will dive into all these areas with a patient.

The Duke Center for Integrative Medicine in Durham, North Carolina, and the Mayo Clinic in 3 US locations are examples of pioneering centers with a health or lifestyle coaching department.

**IMCJ:** One could imagine that a wellness coach is useful in all



areas of medicine. Can it also help clinicians avoid job burnout and manage stress or, perhaps, just face their own issues?

**Ms Benedict:** The challenges that patients face in life and wellness are the same for practitioners. I know one integrative MD who has partnered with a lifestyle coach for 20 years. He told me his coach has helped him through many opportunities, stresses, and challenges to balance his own life and make his vision of patient wellness a reality. There is nothing more rewarding for a wellness coach than to be part of a collaborative wellness team.

Also, there are hospital centers coming on board with programs specifically for their employees. One example is the Southeast Alabama Medical Center (SAMC) in Dothan. Jan Largess, RN, with a specialty in certified occupational health, is the employee team leader of health and wellness for about 2600 employees. Largess's passion and mission is to proactively focus on prevention and wellness instead of "sick care." SAMC utilizes wellness coaching with employees who have some form of borderline or diagnosed health risk, such as smoking or a cardiac risk profile. The coaching is one-on-one and helps employees to focus on awareness, advocacy, goal setting, compliance with healthcare recommendations, planning, and carrying out their own personal wellness visions for their lives.

**IMCJ:** Are there ways coaching can help a practitioner improve skill sets, such as effective patient communication?

**Ms Benedict:** Absolutely. The coach can model powerful communication and active listening to help practitioners create respectful, trusting relationships with both patients and fellow team members. Coaching gives the practitioner a chance to create what are called "living moments." This term is borrowed from John Shotter, emeritus professor of communication in the Department of Communication, University of New Hampshire.<sup>1</sup> Zeev Neuwirth, MD, chief of internal medicine at Harvard Vanguard Medical Associates in Boston, expands on Shotter's work by suggesting living moments are "emergent, non-repetitive, 'organic' moments within clinical conversations in which patients 'call out,' 'point,' or 'signify' shifts in a medical interview."<sup>2</sup> When practitioners are keenly aware of these shifts and the context of what patients are going through at home and in their professional lives, they gain a more holistic understanding of the patient's medical, family, and social history.

I believe that to more effectively serve their patients in this area, practitioners need to personally experience the coaching relationship. They will then know firsthand the benefits of coaching within their field of expertise and their own lives. Practitioners will thereby more readily incorporate "living moments" into their time with the patient and have a better sense of when to recommend the patient move forward with her own wellness coach to focus on making lasting lifestyle behavioral changes.

Hence, no matter the healthcare discipline, coaching exposure to a dialogue in which "living moments" are central allows the practitioner to experience and practice more effective, compassionate patient communication skills. The practitioner/patient encounter then becomes a relationship-building process, not just fact gathering. Thus, practitioners can make those 15 minutes or so they actually have with a patient really count, ultimately supporting the possibility that patients will comply with their recommendations.

**IMCJ:** If either a patient or a practitioner hires a wellness coach, what can be expected from the process?

**Ms Benedict:** A coaching process typically begins with an initial complimentary coaching session to assess a client's coaching readiness. In the case of wellness coaching, clients provide a summary of their current health situations and, in the case of a patient, any physician's recommendations along with personal life and wellness goals as well as any potential challenges to reaching these goals. As the coaching process continues, the client creates a plan that is specific, measurable, attainable/actionable, realistic/relevant, and time-phased—called SMART. This process tracks the client's successes, challenges, opportunities, gratitude, commitments, short- and long-term action steps, and specific goals for each session.

For the patient, a wellness coach and traceable SMART plan can also keep the physician/healthcare provider informed about patient progress if that is the client's wish. Coaches help both clients and physicians recognize that change takes time and even small steps in the right direction are beneficial.

Above all, the wellness coach helps the client through positive affirmation of self—no guilt trips here. Thus, the primary focus may not always be the ultimate outcome, such as "Will the client be able to keep *all* the weight off?" or "Can this physician improve his communication skills?" Instead, other attributes, such as self-efficacy, empowerment, and personal motivation, are recognized as significant factors that contribute to lasting change.

**IMCJ:** If a practitioner were to suggest a wellness coach for a patient, what professional qualities should one look for in an individual and a program?

**Ms Benedict:** Look for someone who is accredited with the International Coach Federation (ICF, [www.coachfederation.org](http://www.coachfederation.org)). ICF's membership involves just about every coaching specialty, from executive or business coaching to wellness coaching, just to name a few. The ICF addresses topics such as ethical guidelines, professional standards, core competencies, coaching agreements with clients, and affiliated training schools.

As mentioned earlier, SAMC's wellness staff offers an excellent model and the members definitely understand and practice the distinction between the role of clinician/patient

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*"The coaching process helps a client discover his own path to wellness."*

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and coach/client (while others, unfortunately, may blur those distinctions). To this end, SAMC's wellness coaching program supports specific wellness coach training, such as with Michael Arloski, PhD, one of the key developers of the field of wellness coaching. I believe his book, *Wellness Coaching for Lasting Lifestyle Change* (Whole Person Associates, Inc, 2007), is the first and most comprehensive book written on wellness and health coaching. When clients hire a coach they want results, but ultimately the best results will come from a person who has a passion to help, listen, understand, and rally to a client's side. These qualities are the heart and soul of the profession.

*To read more on practitioner communication, request reprints of Sharon's IMCJ article series on this subject (go to [www.imjournal.com](http://www.imjournal.com)): Benedict S. How practitioners do and don't communicate, Part I. IMCJ. 2007;6(6):52-57; Benedict S. How practitioners do and don't communicate, Part II: Generational trends impacting a wellness practice. IMCJ. 2008;7(1):46-49.*

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**Kimberly Lord Stewart** is the editorial director at New Hope Natural Media in Boulder, Colorado, and the author of *Eating Between the Lines: The Supermarket Shopper's Guide to the Truth Behind Food Labels* (St. Martin's Griffin, 2007).

#### References

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2. Budyn C, Neuwirth Z, Schrader S. Performing physician-patient communication within objective structured clinical examinations. *Integr Med Clin J.* 2005;4(4):50-55.