

## Miami firm wants doctor shopping to be Web-friendly

By Brian Bandell

**F**inding a good doctor to see at a convenient time and for a competitive price often is a luck-of-the-draw effort. It's especially tough for those without health plans to guide them and for people trying to get uninsured procedures, like cosmetic surgery.

But a Miami company, founded by the former South Florida market VP for Blue Cross Blue Shield of Florida, is aiming to change that. Ken Sellers wants to make scheduling a medical appointment online as easy as purchasing airline tickets.

"Doctors understand the Internet is a tool that many of their patients already use for purchases," he said. New World Health Corp.'s Web site, [www.ehealthxchange.com](http://www.ehealthxchange.com), will allow patients to search a database of registered local doctors for available appointments and schedule them online. The appointments are automatically booked on the doctor's schedule, allowing the patient to book a visit even when the office is closed.

The site can help find doctors who see patients on weekends or have late hours, which is usually a trial-and-error process.

The Web site will also compare doctors by price for their most common services based on the patient's individual health coverage. Physician pricing information is often difficult to obtain without inquiring at multiple offices.

Patients who use Sellers' service must pay their out-of-pocket doctors' appointment costs up front online.

To help users measure doctor quality, the Web site will include biographical information and a star rating, plus a comments section written by patients.

With about 30 days to go before completing pre-release testing with two local doctor offices, Sellers has set a goal of enrolling about 4,000 of the 21,000 doctors in South Florida in the next three years. It costs doctors \$500 a year and patients \$8.95 a year, with their children under 15 included free.

Sellers is the full owner of New World Health, but he's planning a private placement in the next 90 days, with a goal of raising \$500,000 to fund the launch. Six investors have signed on so far, he said. Using part of

the proceeds, he hopes to have six sales representatives and seven installers by next summer.

As more people join high-deductible health plans, having pricing information will become critical in choosing a doctor, said Dr. Abbie Leibowitz, chief medical officer and executive VP of Plymouth Meeting, Pa.-based Health Advocate, which provides health care counseling to employees at more than 1,600 companies. Uninsured patients have an even greater need for pricing and quality information because there are no health plans to help them sort through doctors, he said.

"It's a step toward making the health care world much more consumer-friendly," Leibowitz said of the concept of [ehealthxchange.com](http://ehealthxchange.com). "The limitation as you first get started is only a small number of physicians will participate in the beginning and they may not be the doctors you want to see."

New World Health is going to start by marketing the service to doctors, who will then pass it onto their patients, Sellers said. It won't mass-market to patients until it has hundreds of doctors in its database in each county, he said.

One of the first doctors to sign up is Dr. Fredrick Scavone, a foot and ankle surgeon who works out of Palmetto General Hospital in Hialeah. His two-doctor practice used to depend on a paper scheduling and billing system before implementing them on computer through the Web site.

Making appointments online relieves his staff of much of their scheduling work over the phone, Scavone said. He also expects the Web site, which has a Spanish version, to help him attract new patients.

He doesn't mind posting his pricing information because most insured patients will have similar rates for procedures done by doctors of the same specialty. But doctors in different specialties can have different rates for the same service, Scavone said. Uninsured patients or those looking for uncovered treatments can see prices vary widely, he said.

"There will be some doctors who don't think about it that way," Scavone said, "but I think the majority of physicians are tech-savvy and are going to embrace it."