

Beyond Convenience: Becoming a Healthcare Partner

■ Steve Sellars

For much of Urgent Care's history, convenience was our calling card. Walk-in access, extended hours, 7-day availability, and locations close to where people live and work changed what patients expected from healthcare. Convenience helped build this field, but it won't be the only thing defining our future.

Last month, I wrote about the forces reshaping healthcare: growing challenges with primary care access, rising costs, pressure on emergency departments, and employers searching for better ways to connect their workforce with affordable care. Those challenges create an enormous opportunity for Urgent Care, but they also ask more of us.

The Next Evolution

What Urgent Care needs to focus on now is becoming an even stronger healthcare partner. That starts with recognizing what we do, and what we don't do. Urgent Care isn't a replacement for primary care. Patients need longitudinal relationships with primary care clinicians, particularly for chronic disease management and preventive care. Hospitals and emergency departments remain essential for patients requiring higher-acuity services. But between those settings is an enormous and growing need for timely, high-quality, affordable, everyday healthcare. That's where Urgent Care excels.

Approximately half a million patients walk through our doors each day. Our clinicians evaluate illnesses and injuries, perform diagnostic testing, provide occupational health services, identify conditions requiring higher levels of care, and help patients determine what should happen next. That last part is increasingly important.

Being the front door to everyday healthcare isn't simply about treating the patient in front of us. It's about helping that patient move appropriately through a very complicated

healthcare system.

Imagine the opportunity when an Urgent Care visit more seamlessly connects a patient back to primary care, helps a health system avoid unnecessary emergency department utilization, gives an employer's workforce faster access to appropriate care, or identifies a patient who needs more specialized treatment. In that model, our value extends beyond the individual visit.

For clinicians, this evolution reinforces the importance of clinical excellence, appropriate referrals, care coordination, and practicing at the top of our capabilities.

For operators, it creates opportunities to build stronger relationships with health systems, employers, payers, and other healthcare partners.

This evolution also requires us to demonstrate our value. Access matters, but increasingly, our partners will expect evidence of quality, outcomes, appropriate utilization, patient experience, and cost. That's why the Urgent Care Association's work around advocacy, benchmarking, quality standards, industry data, and initiatives like the "Bring Congress to Urgent Care" campaign is so important. Through that campaign, we're helping policymakers see firsthand the impact Urgent Care has on patients, communities, and the broader healthcare system.

Together, these efforts help build the credibility required for Urgent Care to assume a larger role in healthcare delivery. That credibility—and the relationships that support it—will be increasingly important moving forward. The organizations that thrive won't simply be those that see the most patients or operate the most centers. They will be those that understand how Urgent Care fits into the larger healthcare ecosystem while building relationships that make the entire system work better.

We should be proud that convenience helped establish Urgent Care. Now we have an opportunity to build on it. Our next chapter is about becoming more connected, more measurable, and more valuable to the patients, employers, payers, and healthcare partners who increasingly depend on us. That's how we move from being a convenient place to receive care to an indispensable partner in delivering it. ■



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