

A Primary Care Advocate for Doctors' Well-being

Family physician led Chicago's first community-based residency program **By Delia O'Hara**

Deborah Edberg, MD, is chief wellness officer for Oak Street Health, a fast-growing developer and operator of senior health centers across the country that CVS Health purchased last year for more than \$10 billion. Oak Street is critical to CVS' value-based primary care platform designed to improve outcomes and reduce costs—particularly for those in underserved communities.

DEBORAH EDBERG, MD, inaugural chief wellness officer for Oak Street Health, believes healthcare organizations should prioritize their clinicians' well-being not only so they can continue to perform well in their jobs, but also because "their lives are important, too."

Says Dr. Edberg, "We're all in this together."

Oak Street, part of the CVS Health family of companies, has more than 200 clinics in 25 states that serve older adults on Medicare. Dr. Edberg joined the organization in 2019 as a family medicine physician, and still spends about half her time seeing patients at Oak Street's Madison Street Clinic in Chicago.

Primary-care physicians are key to healthy communities, she says: "We manage patients' chronic diseases, we manage prevention, we keep people out of the hospital."

Nearly 7% of practicing physicians left medicine in 2020 and 2021, citing safety concerns related to COVID, stress, and "untenable" hours. Internists and family practice physicians were likeliest to leave.

"Providers have reached a tipping point," and healthcare organizations like (Oak Street) are taking steps to address their well-being, Dr. Edberg says. "We can't always give everybody everything they want, but we can make sure that it's on the table, and that we listen."

Dr. Edberg was the founding program director of both the Northwestern McGaw Family Medicine Residency Program at Erie Family Health Center in Humboldt Park, one of the first Teaching Health Centers in the country; and, later, the Rush Esperanza Family Medicine program on the Southwest Side, in partnership with Esperanza Health Centers.

The innovative, federally funded Teaching Health Centers GME program, begun on a national basis in 2010, trains primary-care residents in community-based settings, often FQHCs, rather than academic medical centers. Graduates of these training programs are significantly more likely to practice in underserved communities, including




rural areas, than are graduates of traditional residency programs.

"It's had an enormous impact," Dr. Edberg says of the program.

An associate professor at Rush University, and until last year the director of GME development there, Dr. Edberg has spent her clinical career working with patients across the age spectrum in underserved communities, and has been a leader in the Illinois Academy of Family Physicians.

She has high hopes for improved outcomes with the value-based care that Oak Street offers people in underserved communities. "Value-based care rewards providers when patients get better," she says.

Dr. Edberg grew up in Pittsburgh, Pa. Her father was a forensic pathologist, her mother a teacher. As a child, Dr. Edberg wanted to be veterinarian, but later decided on medicine.

Dr. Edberg lives in Lincoln Square in Chicago with her husband, Rick Wood, who works in sales, their two young children, and their Bernese mountain dog. She enjoys adventurous travel, including scuba diving, and reading fiction. She also loves to write, and belongs to a writers' group with other physicians and behavioral health clinicians. 

Career Highlights

DEBORAH EDBERG, MD, earned a BS in biology from Princeton University in New Jersey, and her MD from Thomas Jefferson Medical College in Pennsylvania. She has been among *Chicago Magazine's* top primary care doctors since 2018. Yet she says her proudest achievement is founding two community-based Teaching Health Center programs. She hopes her work in wellness will be just as consequential. "I enjoy creating something new, and solving a problem I think is significant."