BUCKLAND - If you drive along Heath Stage Terrace too fast, you'll miss it. This oasis of healing sits just beyond a fast-food chain. The signs may not be very conspicuous, but the building is warm; inviting neighbors home, except for a sign directing patients to a back parking lot. Here, there’s no hurry.

"Except it's about the person, not an insurance code or time-limited visits," says Dr. Kathleen Grandison, an M.D. who has been practicing family medicine at West County Physicians for 25 years and is senior physician there. "We try to provide the best medical care with a few more options.

Doxes of books on healing body, mind and spirit are neatly arranged on bookshelves and tables in the waiting room, all within arm's reach of patients who might be in search of an alternative to conventional treatment. And they'll find it. West County Physicians offer.

Holistic connections

In addition to Grandison, the practice employs two nurse practitioners, both certified in family medicine. Lauren Fox, FNP (family nurse practitioner), has worked in the practice for 20 years and is a fully trained homeopathic therapist. She recently returned from a trip to Haiti where she taught local practitioners about homeopathic technique.

"Homeopathy is a branch of medicine that treats a patient's symptoms with natural substances, usually plants, that promote the body's natural system of healing," says Fox. "We call them 'constitutional remedies.'"

With more than 2,000 homeopathic remedies available, quiet listening to patients' life stories is key.

"Sometimes that's all that a patient needs; someone to take the time to listen to their story," Fox says. "Through careful listening and identifying medical symptoms that might respond to a homeopathic remedy, but we treat patients, not symptoms. We empower patients with homeopathy when traditional treatments are necessary. If a patient has high blood pressure, for example, we treat the symptoms with medication, but will offer an additional remedy, such as sea salt, a catalyst that will work with traditional medications to promote healing.

The practice also offers Raphaele healing, a treatment for long-standing emotional trauma and stress. Key to this therapy's success is "non-judgmental listening in sacred space," says Grandison, who is a certified Raphaele therapist and sees patients in the warm embrace of a dimly lighted room with an icon of the archangel of healing, Raphael, on the wall. Patients sit on soft cushioned chairs neatly arranged around a table that can accommodate a lighted candle of the spirit.

"Often, it is the first time that a patient has ever told their painful life story to another person," Grandison says.

Striving to maintain the practice

It has not been easy, however, to attract new physicians to the practice. Over the years physicians have drawn to the area by the promise of quality of life. Since the practice was established in 1987, West County Physicians have offered something different to patients; a primary care practice that treats an array of common medical problems, but also provides the opportunity to explore alternative remedies for patients that have not responded to conventional treatment options. Originally a federally operated community health center, West County Physicians was founded when local residents wanted an independent health care provider.

The therapy helps patients to reach their “inner core,” the physical, emotional, spiritual and mental aspects of self. Grandison says that Raphaele therapy has been the most effective treatment for post-9/11 emotional stress.

Most recently, Angel Russek, FNP, joined the practice and will focus on holistic health. Having taught at Greenfield Community College before nursing school, she knows the area and looks forward to providing health care to women and children. The practice does not provide obstetrical care, but has seen patients.

In July, Dr. Jane Willis will leave West County Physicians to open a specialty practice in Chinese medicine, including acupuncture and herbal remedies, at 10 Bridge Street in Shelburne Falls.

"I will be opting out of an insurance-based system so that I will be able to provide alternative healing in a way that most benefits the patient, not insurance companies’ quotas," Willis says.

Willis has been practicing family medicine with West County Physicians for nine years.

In the electronic age

Despite staff changes, West County Physicians is meeting the ever-changing challenges of modern health care. For example, more than half of patient record papers have been transferred to an electronic medical record or "EMR" format, which has been mandated by the Affordable Care Act.

"Many solo family practitioners and some group practices have closed rather than try to meet the time and expense of putting in an EMR system," says Grandison. "We have no choice, because in order to practice medicine now and in the future, health care providers of all sorts will have to communicate quickly and efficiently in transmitting patient medical data, which, of course, is protected by strict privacy regulations."

Electronic Medical Records will not only help medical practices meet the Affordable Care Act but also make it easier to monitor medical practices — not always to the practice's advantage.

"There are generally accepted standards for vaccination, and Grandison says. "Some of our patients refuse to vaccinate themselves or their children. Vaccination is a quality indicator. If we don’t check off on the EMR that vaccination has been given, we might not get full payment for a patient visit. We practice medicine differently, and do what’s best for the patient."

West County Physicians is at 25 Heath Stage Terrace. For more information, call 413-652-5917 or visit westcountyphysicians.com

By Nick Gilbert

West County Physicians' staff members: Lauren Fox, FNP (left), Kathy Grandison, M.D., Angel Russek, FNP and Jane Willis, M.D. Russek has just come on board and Willis is opening her own holistic practice on Bridge Street soon.

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