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Surpassing expectations

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Following locations in Cleveland and Chagrin Falls, Cleveland Clinic is adding a third functional medicine center (shown) to be located in Lakewood.

Five years after its opening as the first of its kind in an academic medical center, Cleveland Clinic's Center for Functional Medicine has seen explosive growth dealing with the social determinants of health.

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Five years ago, when opening its Center for Functional Medicine, [Cleveland Clinic](#) quickly confirmed its theory: Patients were eager to find a new way to feel better.

The center, dedicated to the holistic treatment of the root causes of health problems, aims to do just that.

The first of its kind in an academic medical center, the Clinic's center was on the forefront of a trend of providers and institutions looking into offering functional medicine, which accounts for the ways lifestyle factors — such as nutrition, sleep, exercise, stress, relationships and genetics — contribute to disease.

"Just looking back five years ago, where we started and today, how we've grown today is beyond, I think, what any of us believed," said Tawny Jones, administrator for the center.

Full on its first day in September 2014, the center quickly outgrew the six exam rooms dedicated to it.

From 900 visits in 2014 after it opened in the fall to roughly 26,000 visits last year, the center has seen explosive growth. In January 2017, it moved into a new 17,000-square-foot space on the Clinic's main campus and opened a second location in Chagrin Falls. This year, the center added a third location in Lakewood.

Since opening, the center has served more than 12,100 unique patients at three locations. It's also nearly quadrupled the number of caregivers dedicated to it, from 10 in 2014 to 38 today.



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Amy Mack

Nationally, there's a growing desire among institutions to offer functional medicine programs, said Amy R. Mack, CEO of the Institute for Functional Medicine (IFM), a national nonprofit that offers continuing medical education in functional medicine.

"Across the country, there are institutions that are coming to us and saying, 'We are ready to open up a functional medicine center; help us figure out how to do it,' " Mack said.

To date, IFM has trained 15,000 practitioners. It also offers a seven-course certification in functional medicine. In the past five years, the field has grown from 216 to more than 1,100 certified practitioners. Mack said she anticipates that next year there will be 5,000 who are either certified or on their way to becoming certified as functional medicine practitioners.

As more providers look to offer this type of care and more patients turn to it to feel better, the industry is nearing a tipping point.

"One of the things that we see happening with some functional medicine concepts is they get adopted into standard of care and they no longer are called functional medicine but the concept is embraced," Mack explained. "As concepts of functional medicine are pulled into or adopted by traditional standard of care, that's a win."

Dr. Mark Hyman, head of strategy and innovation for the Center for Functional Medicine, said he knew there was a huge demand and need for functional medicine. While hopeful, he didn't realize how much the center would be welcomed into the Cleveland Clinic community. Hyman said the most exciting piece for him is the increased collaboration with other institutes and departments that are working together to solve difficult chronic disease problems.



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The Clinic added a second functional medicine location in Chagrin Falls and already has a third planned for Lakewood.

Though the center started as an incubator under executive administration, it was fully integrated into the organization Oct. 1 by joining Cleveland Clinic Community Care, a population health unit that encompasses physicians and other providers from a variety of primary care areas. The move offers the center a host of opportunities to work with population health and on value-based care, Hyman said.

"The burden of chronic disease is so great and the acute care model of treatment, which we're so good at here at Cleveland Clinic, isn't really suited to dealing with chronic diseases, which are mostly driven by diet and lifestyle," he said. "So I think it's a real exciting moment where we can have the support and the infrastructure of one of the biggest institutes in the entire Clinic to help us to grow and help us to advance our research mission and our community-based work."

The center doesn't have restrictions on the type of patients it will see. Some of the most common conditions seen in the practice include autoimmune disease, digestive disorders and weight management.

In addition to one-on-one visits, the center also offers shared medical appointments in which eight to 10 patients battling the same type of condition meet for a group visit. Jones said these shared appointments, as well as the virtual visits offered, account for about 38% of the center's appointments with practitioners.

The health care system has long been structured for providers to diagnose a condition and treat it with the latest drug or intervention, rather than looking at why the patient has the condition or disease and what factors — such as lifestyle, nutritional or behavioral change — contributed to it, Jones said.

"All of that is not embedded in the medical school curriculum at this point, so it's been very difficult for practitioners to adopt this model of care when the system is not designed for the functional medicine type of intervention," Jones said. "Fortunately, we're at a place where one, Cleveland Clinic recognizes the value that all of these other components play into health. And we're a leader, we're a model for other health care systems and services to really recognize that these are important components of health in general, and we need to invest in the educational training, we need to invest in the community engagement, we need to invest in our patients in a whole different way."



Community outreach is a primary goal for the center, Jones added. Since 2015, the center has offered the Daniel Plan, a faith-based wellness program that has supported more than 1,100 individuals in 28 churches.

More recently, the center has partnered with the Langston Hughes community center in Cleveland to offer a group of patients there access to a health coach, dietitian and physician assistant through a 10-week pilot program at no cost to the community members.

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Tawny Jones

"We're actually ... trying to raise awareness that this model of care is necessary — the model of care meaning the services we offer: lifestyle and behavior change is necessary; nutrition counseling is necessary in order to help patients understand how to self-manage their conditions," Jones said.

She added that the center didn't know what to expect, but patients have "completely embraced" the program, attending regularly, engaging and asking thoughtful questions about their health.

Jones said the plan is to expand this offering to other community centers and continue to support the Langston Hughes community. She said she hopes it will serve as a model for the Clinic, as well as for other health care systems, to consider whether the group visit model is an effective way to reach the community.

Mitchell Wax, a 73-year-old Lakewood resident, had struggled to lose weight most of his life. After two separate bariatric surgeries, he still wasn't losing enough weight, so he turned to a program at Duke University, which he attended on and off for a couple of years. Eventually, with his diabetes out of control, they told him to go on a low-carb, high-fat keto diet. He returned to Ohio, unsure of how he would maintain his diet, until he found the Center for Functional Medicine last year.

He enrolled in a 10-week program at the center, and took it a second time to make sure he learned everything. Over the past year, he's lost 76 pounds, thrown away his short-acting insulin, cut his long-acting insulin use by more than half and his blood sugars are down to normal.

Prior to his own experience with functional medicine, Wax said he wasn't very interested in it, but he is now a huge advocate for the practice. A psychologist, Wax now talks to his patients about the benefits of functional medicine.

"Learning about the health benefits for me personally has just been eye-opening," he said. "What they said was going to happen actually happened. The biggest thing is learning how not to be hungry. ... Not being hungry is the biggest gift in the world."

The burden of chronic disease is increasing, with one in two Americans suffering from a chronic disease, Hyman noted.

"Our current approaches don't really work that well," he said. "I mean, we're just sort of mopping up the flow while the sink's overflowing. We need to get to the root cause, and

functional medicine is all about dealing with the causes and dealing with the social determinants of health and dealing with the food-driven causes of health."

Inline Play

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