Reducing Wait Times for Anxious Patients

**CHALLENGE:** One in eight women will be diagnosed with breast cancer in her lifetime, and many more report breast problems that turn out to be benign. The process of identification and diagnosis of breast problems typically takes place in more than one location—e.g., a doctor’s office, a radiology facility, a surgeon’s office, a hospital—and can take up to four weeks. This time period is usually intensely stressful for the patient and her family.

**SOLUTION:** Surgeon Francis Marzoni, MD, of the Palo Alto (CA) Medical Foundation recognized that a free-standing outpatient breast imaging center could drastically reduce the wait time for diagnosis. “Once a woman feels a lump in her breast, you can’t ‘unring’ that bell,” he says. “But what we can do is eliminate undue stress and anxiety by reducing her wait.”

Marzoni proposed a business model for such a center as an MBA student in the University of Tennessee’s Physician Executive MBA (PEMBA) program. “The modeling tools we learned in PEMBA enabled me to put the plan together,” he says. “I developed this concept alongside four colleagues in Palo Alto, but none of them had experience with business plans. What really made a difference was the Microsoft Excel® tools I learned from [UT finance professor] Phil Daves—give me a live spreadsheet now and I can run with it.”

Marzoni’s proposed center would allow women with any sort of breast problems to refer themselves directly to the center rather than go through a primary care physician. The center would function as a one-stop service for exams, testing, and diagnosis in a comfortable, spa-like environment with minimal waiting time.

One crucial component of the plan was to bring only fellowship-trained radiologists on board—the best of the best. In an ambulatory environment centered on efficiency and same-day service, Marzoni reasoned, accuracy and experience were key to delivering the highest quality care to patients.

**RESULTS:** The Breast Diagnostic Center, a subsidiary of the Palo Alto Medical Foundation, opened in 2010 funded largely through an enthusiastic outpouring of community support. “It is a lovely place,” Marzoni says. “The workflows are so efficient. It’s rare to have more than one person in the waiting room, and when there are two, they know they’re there for the same thing. It’s even easy to park, which is a direct benefit to patients because it’s one less thing to worry about when they’re already scared.”

While it’s still too early to measure cancer outcomes, the center has already achieved its goals for turnaround time. “Before the center opened,” Marzoni says, “our range for identification of a problem to diagnosis was anywhere from five days to 28 days. With the center in place, that range is down to two to four days.”

The facility boasts five fellowship-trained radiologists—“probably the most you’ll find outside an academic medical center,” Marzoni says. “On the strength of that, we were also able to attract two surgeons who do nothing but breast cancer surgery, so patients can get a diagnosis and meet with an excellent surgeon on the same afternoon.”

In the last year, a federally qualified health center (FQHC) in economically disadvantaged East Palo Alto contacted Marzoni and his team seeking advice for setting up mammography services. Knowing the regulatory burden and setup costs the FQHC would face, Marzoni offered to simply share the Breast Diagnostic Center’s plan.
Center’s services instead. On Saturdays, underserved East Palo Alto patients can come to the center for a free mammogram.

“That’s a tangible, positive outcome for our community,” Marzoni says. “To me, that’s the icing on the cake.”

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