

Susan Mullaney offers insights into Kaiser Permanente's first years in Washington state

Take an inside look at Kaiser Permanente's growth and innovations since establishing its new region in Washington state. In a recent podcast interview, Susan Mullaney, president of Kaiser Permanente's Washington region, offers insights into the progress the organization has made and its plans for the future. Here are some highlights:

Expanding Kaiser Permanente's clinical footprint.

In the last few years, Kaiser Permanente has added 400 doctors and opened several new medical facilities – in Gig Harbor, West Olympia, and Seattle's South Lake Union and Ballard neighborhoods. A fifth new medical facility is scheduled to open in spring 2020 at Smokey Point in Marysville. New specialty care hubs are also part of the major investment Kaiser Permanente plans for Washington state over the next decade, Mullaney says.

Increasing virtual care options.

"The new front door to medicine is through hand-held devices, and 40% of all our patient care is virtual now," Mullaney says. One of the most popular virtual services the organization has launched is real-time online chats between patients and providers. Patients had more than 58,000 sessions in one year, and reported 99.9% satisfaction with the option.

Introducing other innovations.

In several communities in Washington state, prescription drugs can be delivered to patients' doorsteps in 2 hours or less. And the South Lake Union Medical Office has a

prescription drug dispensing machine where patients can get and pay for commonly used medications.

Expediting mental health care.

Mental health specialists are integrated into all of Kaiser Permanente's primary care teams and patients are routinely screened for mental health issues. When issues are uncovered, patients are offered immediate short-term treatment, right in the primary care setting.

Mullaney says clinicians have told her that sometimes 5 or 6 patients a day come in for other reasons, then admit to being suicidal. Kaiser Permanente offers intervention, right when it's needed most.

Overcoming inaccurate assumptions about HMOs.

Mullaney discusses how the image of health maintenance organizations (HMOs) is beginning to change and find favor. This is especially true among millennials, who are discovering the simplicity and convenience of Kaiser Permanente's integrated, coordinated care.

The organization has more than 1,200 physicians, physician assistants, optometrists, midwives, and psychologists in Washington state. A patient's health information is securely

stored in an electronic medical record and readily available to multiple providers. Many medical facilities offer one-stop convenience, with office visits, lab, pharmacy, and more under one roof. And patients can access care through multiple virtual options.

Looking toward the future.

"We are on the precipice of one of the most exciting times in health care," Mullaney says, citing 2 reasons she's so optimistic. In the future, genomics will use a patient's unique DNA profile to identify what they're at risk for, and precision medicine will personalize treatment for each patient, she says. "It will be far more effective than anything we can do today, produce longer, healthier years for people, and drive down costs."



Learn more about Kaiser Permanente Washington by checking out Mullaney's interview on the podcast "The Checkup."



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Mental health care – when and where patients most need it

Making mental health services readily available in the primary care setting is one of the ways Kaiser Permanente is helping patients get care when they need it, said Greg Simon, MD, MPH, in a recent interview for the podcast “The Checkup.” Dr. Simon is a psychiatrist with Washington Permanente Medical Group and a senior investigator with Kaiser Permanente Washington Health Research Institute.

He also discussed the growing need for mental health providers, and how employers and patients benefit from Kaiser Permanente’s prepaid health care system. Here are a few highlights of his interview:

Pairing primary care and mental health services meets patients where they are.

Many people don’t go to a mental health provider when they’re experiencing issues like anxiety or depression, said Dr. Simon. They’re much more likely to go to their primary care doctor, so that’s where Kaiser Permanente provides most of its short-term mental health services.

A mental health specialist is integrated into each Kaiser Permanente medical facility and is available to talk to patients, right on the spot, if a mental health issue surfaces during a primary care visit. All personal physicians have access to a psychiatrist for guidance in prescribing mental health medications, and teams communicate and collaborate frequently, in person and through the patient’s securely shared electronic medical record.

Responding to the growing need for mental health providers.

More people have insurance coverage these days, and the stigma for seeking mental health care has been reduced. That’s great news. But more people seeking care has created an industrywide shortage of mental health providers.

While Kaiser Permanente is actively increasing its mental health staff, it’s simultaneously making the best use of the staff it already has. Having primary care and mental health providers work side by side – sharing resources and providing backup for each other – is one way they’re able to do that.

Providing appropriate care is the only focus in Kaiser Permanente’s prepaid health care system.

Dr. Simon discussed how care in a fee-for-service system revolves around providing care that generates fees. In contrast, Kaiser Permanente’s prepaid system only focuses on providing the most appropriate care, with no fees to consider.

For example, when Dr. Simon prescribes a new medication to a patient, he needs to monitor the

patient’s reaction. In a fee-for-service world, the patient might be asked to come back for another office visit, resulting in a payment to the provider. At Kaiser Permanente, Dr. Simon is most likely to say, “I need you to check in with me in 3 days. Send me a message to let me know how you’re doing.” It’s Kaiser Permanente’s way of providing just what patients need, when they need it.



Dr. Simon is well known for his extensive research on practical approaches to improving mental health care.

We encourage you to check out this interview, the first in a 2-part series with Dr. Simon. The second interview focuses on suicide prevention.



Listen to Dr. Simon’s interview on the podcast “The Checkup.”

Preventing suicide is a key focus at Kaiser Permanente

Suicide was thought to be largely unpredictable and unpreventable when Greg Simon, MD, MPH, began practicing psychiatry about 30 years ago. But research in the last 6 to 8 years has resulted in a more optimistic view today, he says. There's greater understanding of how to identify people who are at risk of suicide and the preventive treatments that actually work.

Dr. Simon discussed Kaiser Permanente's advancements in suicide prevention in a recent interview for a podcast called "The Checkup." He is a psychiatrist with Washington Permanente Medical Group in Seattle and a senior investigator with Kaiser Permanente Washington Health Research Institute. He also leads the Mental Health Research Network, a consortium of research centers affiliated with 13 large health systems across the United States.

Here are a few highlights of Dr. Simon's interview:

Identifying patients at risk of suicide in the primary care setting.

Short-term mental health services are embedded in primary care at all Kaiser Permanente medical facilities, and patients are frequently asked to complete a brief mental health screening questionnaire when they come in for any type of office visit.

When the questionnaire reveals signs of depression, anxiety, or thoughts of self-harm, primary care clinicians are trained to ask patients additional questions: "Do

you have access to lethal means of self-harm, such as pills or firearms?" If the patient answers yes: "Is there someone who can keep them for you until you're feeling better?" The goal is to put some time and distance between suicidal thoughts and acting on them – to help the patient survive to see a better day. An on-site mental health specialist is available to offer immediate intervention when needed.

Putting data to work in reaching more at-risk patients.

Kaiser Permanente has extensive, long-term health records for many of its patients, including information about a patient's mental health history, their use of alcohol and drugs, and any mental health hospitalizations they may have had. This data can be used to reach out to patients who may not come in for an office visit but are at risk of at risk of taking their own life.

Evaluating the effectiveness of suicide prevention programs.

As a senior investigator with Kaiser Permanente's research institute, Dr. Simon is involved in several studies measuring the performance

of suicide prevention programs within Kaiser Permanente and other health systems in the United States. The goal is to determine if current suicide prevention programs are improving care and reducing the incidence of suicide. And, if they aren't, what adjustments need to be made.



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Inclusive and equitable health care is a cornerstone at Kaiser Permanente

Providing inclusive and culturally respectful health care to a diverse population is a long-held commitment at Kaiser Permanente, according to family physician Kristin Conn, MD. In an interview for the podcast “The Checkup,” Dr. Conn discusses the many steps we’re taking to help all people get high-quality care. Here are some highlights of her interview:

Improving access to recommended care.

It’s a well-known fact that certain groups across the country don’t have access to the preventive care they need or the level of health care that everyone deserves. Kaiser Permanente is focusing attention on closing these and other gaps in care – reducing barriers, meeting people where they are, and helping patients achieve their best possible health.

Identifying and overcoming barriers.

Limited ability to speak and understand English, lack of trust in the system, inability to pay cost shares, or time constraints due to work schedules are just a few of the barriers patients may face in seeking medical care. Our goal is to minimize those barriers, providing accessible and culturally respectful care that doesn’t require heroic efforts on our patients’ part.

“We are intentionally building a workforce that is incredibly diverse, with lots of language capabilities,” says Dr. Conn, who speaks Spanish as a second language. In addition,

patient materials are available in numerous languages, and translators are provided in person, over the phone, or via video when needed to make sure our patients’ language and cultural needs and preferences are met. Our many virtual care options also maximize accessibility.

Proactively reaching out to patients.

The data provided by our integrated care and coverage system give us the ability to identify patients who are at risk of certain medical conditions, overdue for health screenings, or in need of financial assistance. It’s a safety net that helps us make sure our patients get the care they need and don’t fall through the cracks.

Advancing equality on an individual basis.

Dr. Conn suggests that there are steps we can all take to build our skills around inclusivity: Start in your own community, she says. Deeply listen to others and seek out perspectives different from your own. Choose to make a difference in your own sphere of influence.



Dr. Conn is a family physician whose areas of interest include women’s health, people of color, and communities that need help getting the care they deserve. She and her family volunteer with an organization that feeds homeless teens and provides housing to homeless families.



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