



More than 9 to 5

Clinic's unique 24/7 operating hours help to meet patient needs

BY MICHAEL MCGILL

Some convenience stores were doing it as early as the 1960s.

Emergency departments (EDs) do it.

And for nearly three years now, Quantum Healthcare, a rural health clinic (RHC) in Hazard, in Perry County, has been doing it too — keeping its doors open 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

That kind of around-the-clock service is an unusual move for an RHC, but one that Dr. Anthony Yonts, one of the clinic's physician-owners, says the area needed and deserved.

"I don't want to sound arrogant, but, if you're going into medicine ... if you're going to practice medicine, then you can't half do it," says Yonts. "People rely on us to know what we're doing, to be educated in our field, in our trade. And so, it's our job to take care of folks."

First Weekends, Then All Hours

The clinic, which launched in 2007 with four physicians and three nurse practitioners, first extended its practice hours — to include weekends — just three years after opening. Yonts recalls that initial expansion was an easy decision to make: The clinic's regular patients were often coming in on Monday mornings seeking a follow-up appointment after a weekend visit to the local emergency room, where they were treated for a runny nose, ear ache or similar malady. They had no options to go elsewhere. And, worst of all, that ED visit would generate a \$500 bill for Yonts' patients, many of whom were, and continue to be, working people with commercial insurance.

"And that bothered me, you know, because it seems like access to health care, if you're employed with commercial insurance, is ridiculously expensive. And so, our thought was, we need to be there for them," Yonts says.

The clinic began its weekend hours in 2010.

Patient volume grew and staff numbers grew.

But, Yonts says, he was never quite satisfied with the weekend expansion. It didn't go far enough. If patients needed care outside of the clinic's business hours — which ran from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. — there were no alternatives to the ED, which was often overwhelmed.

Yonts pitched the idea of 24/7 clinic hours to his three partners, all physicians at Quantum. It wasn't an easy sell. They were a bit hesitant. They had concerns about whether the staff hired to provide the "after hours" care would see enough patients regularly for the experiment to be sustainable. They ran the numbers and thought they could make it work.

It has.

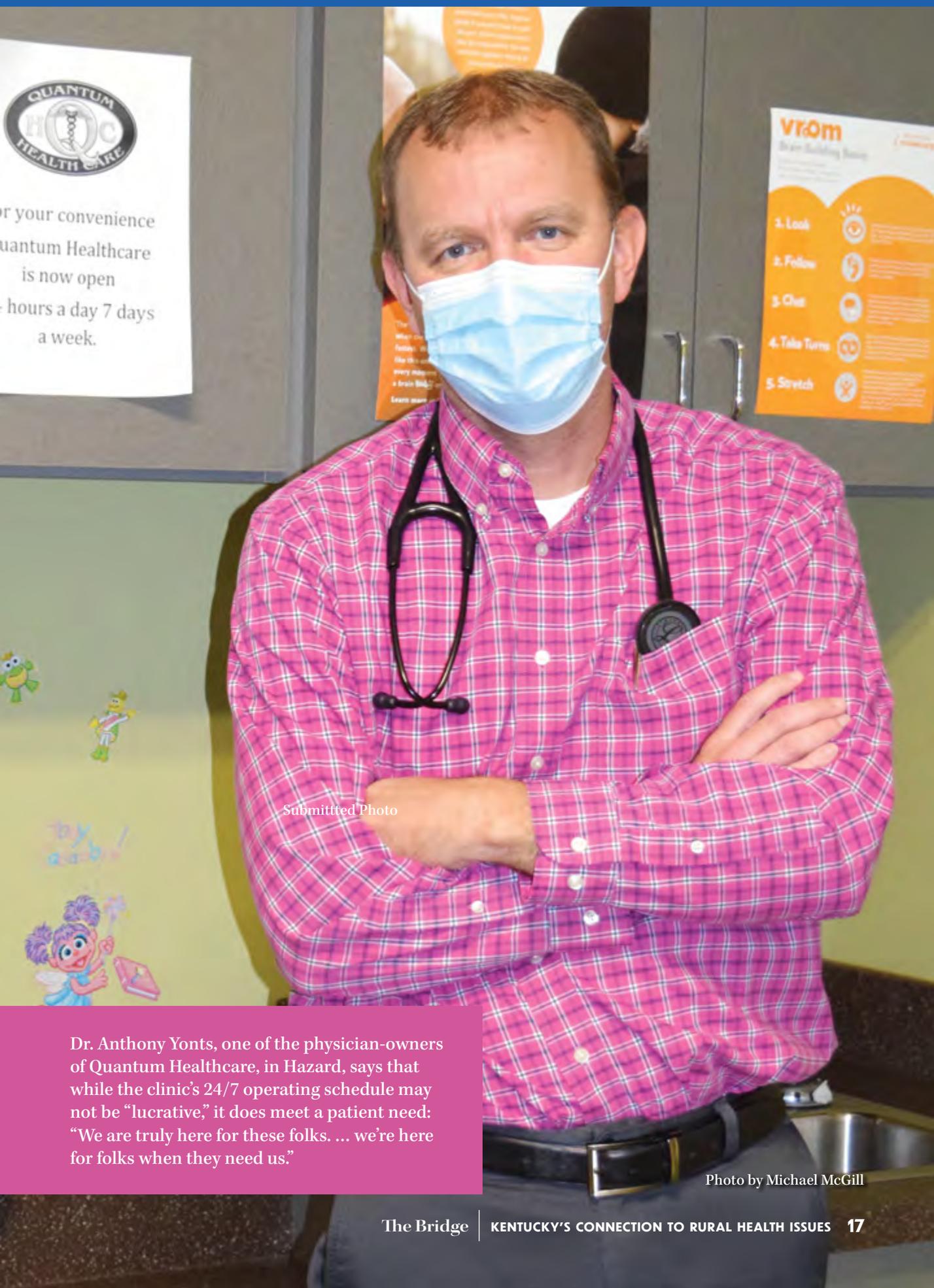
The clinic's been operating 24/7 since 2018. And the clinic's owners don't expect to cut back on those hours any time soon.

"From a financial side, it's not really what you would call 'lucrative,'" Yonts acknowledges. "So, you don't make a ton of money, but you make enough to justify being open. You make enough to pay the employees and all the benefits, and all the costs associated with it. And so, if we can provide a service and break even, and some months do a little bit to the good, we'll take that."

Late-Night Patients

The patients who visit Quantum Healthcare during its late-night hours — from 10 p.m. to 7 a.m., when its staffed by a clerk, a nurse and a nurse practitioner, with a physician on-call — are a bit of a mix, but they tend to present with complaints that are similar to those reported by the clinic's day-time patients.

The clinic sees its regular patients after hours, as walk-ins, for any number of reasons: They may have missed an appointment earlier in the week



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Submitted Photo

Dr. Anthony Yonts, one of the physician-owners of Quantum Healthcare, in Hazard, says that while the clinic’s 24/7 operating schedule may not be “lucrative,” it does meet a patient need: “We are truly here for these folks. ... we’re here for folks when they need us.”

Photo by Michael McGill

and need their prescription refills called in. They may need to have labs taken. Or they may be seeking treatment for an acute condition: they may have trouble moving an arm; they may be experiencing chest pains or breathing problems; or their child may have developed a runny nose, cough or congestion.

There's also the after-hours patients who aren't regularly seen by one of Quantum's providers. For them, the late-night visit is more akin to seeking treatment at an urgent care center: They're provided care for their ailment, but told to follow-up with their own primary care provider.

In all cases, if what patients really need is treatment at the hospital, they are admitted directly from the clinic and are able to skip the ED admissions process at nearby Hazard ARH Regional Medical Center.

Yonts estimates about 60-70 percent of the patients seen during Quantum's late-night and early-morning hours would likely have ended up in the local emergency room had the clinic's doors not been open. The other 30-40 percent tend to stop by because of the convenience factor — the clinic's open, they're up and they're facing a medical concern.

And the patients, Yonts says, love the 24/7 schedule.

"[A]t least once a month, I will get a call or text from someone who says, 'Thank goodness you all did that [began 24-hour service]. Sophie ran a fever at three o'clock this morning. I was so scared. I didn't want to go to the ER, so I just ran up there [to the clinic]. And they swabbed her and she has strep and I felt so much better,'" he recalls. "And so, knowing that we're providing a service for folks, that's rewarding enough."

'Incredibly Slow,' But Always Open

Yonts admits that from midnight to 6 a.m. or 7 a.m., the clinic can be "incredibly slow," with just a person here or there coming through the clinic's doors seeking help. (The clinic's busiest hours tend to be from about 5 p.m. to 10 or 10:30 p.m., he says.)

There have been times, though, when the clinic's lobby has been bustling during those non-traditional hours. The recent COVID-19 surge earlier this fall is a case in point. Forty to 50 people were coming into the clinic some nights scared, sick and in need of care.

"If they're going to the emergency room, they're not going to get seen. They're going to be turned away because the ER was so overwhelmed during that time," Yonts says. "So, I think that's when I was most proud of what we were doing ... because we

were there when we needed to be there."

Quantum's staff has never advertised the office's unique 24/7 hours of operation. Using billboards to promote the round-the-clock service is something that Yonts confesses they should do, but just haven't. But, he says, community members from Perry County and farther away — Floyd County, Knott County, Leslie County and Letcher County — have slowly learned about the clinic's location and its outside-of-traditional business hours schedule.

"And I think that slow growth has been good for the providers because they didn't start off overwhelmed," says Yonts. "And, as it's grown, they've grown too."

Challenges

Operating 24/7 isn't without challenges.

The clinic's staff don't have access to on-site imaging technology — to have x-rays or other scans taken of patients. While there is an imaging center just next door to the clinic, it doesn't stay open late into the evening and certainly not all night long.

Clinic patients also don't have access to a late-night pharmacy where they can pick up prescriptions following their visit. The clinic's providers can offer the first dose of many medications — antibiotics and antihistamines, for instance — to offer some initial relief for patients, but any needed prescriptions have to be picked up once a local pharmacy opens for the day.

"[T]hose are the two things, if I had my wish list, that I would say, 'OK, give me x-ray, give me pharmacy access, and I probably could expand it [the clinic's after-hours service] volume-wise, 25 percent,'" says Yonts.

And just like other medical facilities across the country, the clinic has recently experienced some pandemic-related difficulty hiring nursing staff. (There's never been a problem, though, attracting the nurse practitioners to staff the overnight shift, Yonts says. The first two nurse practitioners hired for the positions three years ago remain on the job today.)

'A Very Unique Model'

John Gale, a researcher who studies rural health clinics, calls Quantum's 24/7 service "a very unique model." Gale, who works at the Maine Rural Health Research Center at the University of Southern Maine, says evening and weekend hours aren't uncommon for RHCs, but a 24/7-style clinic is.

"Most RHCs operate as traditional office-based practices with set hours," Gale says. "With the

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- Dr. Anthony Yonts, Quantum Healthcare

move towards patient-centered medical homes and accountable care organizations, some RHCs and other rural practices are offering evening hours and, to a lesser extent, some limited weekend hours. The logic behind evening and weekend hours is to accommodate patients who may have limited ability to schedule appointments during the day when they might be working or in school.”

Gale suggests that a 24/7-style clinic might be of interest to other RHCs — especially those located in communities that lack a hospital or in communities where a hospital has closed. In those cases, Gale says, a clinic open all day, every day could serve as an alternative to unnecessary ED use or as an urgent care-style facility, much like how Quantum functions.

“Any situation where after-hours care is an unmet need would be a candidate for this model,” he says.

More Than Dollars and Cents

Quantum Healthcare’s 24/7 schedule is certainly unusual. But, it’s working.

It might not be for every clinic, though, Yonts warns.

Most RHC owners and operators — many of them business-minded administrators — will look at Quantum’s after-hours service, check the patient volume numbers, see that it breaks even or makes a small bit of profit, and question why they’re doing it, says Yonts. Why put up with the headaches? It’s not a good business decision, they’ll say.

He understands the sentiment. And, truth be told, from a purely business standpoint, the clinic probably should close its doors around midnight and re-open at 6 a.m., Yonts concedes. But he also knows that the clinic is more than a business. It’s more than just dollars and cents.

“You know, if you’re a first-time mom and your baby is super fussy at 1 o’clock in the morning, how nice is it to just be able to pop in and have a provider look at that baby and say, ‘It’s OK.’ And, so, that’s, for us, that’s the reward,” he says. “Or if you’re 65 years old, you don’t know if this is indigestion or heart burn. How nice is it just to pop in at 2 a.m. just to have it checked out to make sure it’s OK.”

Yonts adds: “I tell everyone, I think our actions speak louder than our words. We are truly here for these folks. ... we’re here for folks when they need us. And that’s what it’s all about.” ■

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