

## Center prods patients toward prevention *CHC will be site of health-related presentations*

By MICHAEL NEARY, Messenger staff writer

When Whitney Graaf pores over the records at the Fort Dodge Community Health Center, she notices many fairly serious illnesses. That, she said, is something staff members would like to see change.

“We’re catching a lot of the big things now, but for the future we’re hoping to prevent them so they’re not such a problem,” said Graaf, administrative coordinator for the CHC.

Prevention will be the focus of a cluster of health-related presentations Tuesday at 2 p.m. The presentations are part of a nationwide push for preventive health care by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services — and they will take place at the CHC at 126 N. 10th St.

Tuesday’s gathering will feature both local and regional health officials, including the regional administrator for the CMMS. Fort Dodge Mayor Terry Lutz will also speak.

The people who work at the CHC want to get the word out about their center’s services, as well.

Graaf said she suspects people who could take advantage of the Center are not doing it. She said many people don’t know that it exists — or they believe they’re not close enough to the poverty level to be able to use it. But she said the sliding scale can benefit people who aren’t at the poverty level.

The CHC replaced a free clinic when it opened in April 2006, according to Krystal Crotts, the clinic manager. Crotts said the staff does not turn away people who cannot pay, but they do require documentation of financial need. About half of the people who come to the CHC, Crotts said, do not have insurance.

For those patients, she said, the center receives a federal grant to help pay for services.

“A lot of our uninsured population is working, but they work lower-waged jobs,” she said.

Some of the uninsured, she noted, work full time but can’t afford to buy insurance from employers, while others piece together part-time jobs. And some, she said, are small business owners.

Crotts said the center provides general practice, as well as services for behavioral health and women’s health. She said the center also has an in-house laboratory and an in-house pharmacy with reduced-cost medication.

“We really sit down with patients and explain their care thoroughly to them,” she added.

Some of that work involves tweaking diets to include more healthy foods and cut down on things like soda pop. As she talked in her office, Crotts quickly unearthed a list charting the heavy sugar content of a 12-ounce can of soda.

About half of the patients at the CHC have diabetes, something that sparked staff members to track the sorts of treatment they administer.

On Tuesday, Crotts said, the presentations would publicize the kinds of preventive care now funded by Medicare.

“They really need to take advantage of what Medicare can pay for with regard to screenings,”

she said.

Medicare began covering a number of additional preventive care measures in 2005 — measures that most people on Medicare do not take advantage of, according to Julie Brookhart, a spokeswoman for the Kansas City Regional Office of the CMMS.

“By our statistics it shows that less than 50 percent ... take advantage of the preventive benefits that are available,” she said.

But coverage does not equal free care for many of the preventive services, noted Barbara Erickson, program/care giver coordinator for the Elderbridge Agency on Aging in Fort Dodge. The one-time “Welcome to Medicare” physical examination costs patients a 20 percent co-payment fee after the \$131 deductible is met, according to Erickson, who was citing Medicare documents.

Erickson that fee could be tough to pay for some patients.

“It almost seems like we’re limiting access to a certain group of Medicare beneficiaries,” she said.

Erickson noted, too, that an obstacle to receiving service could be working through the reams of information — filled with charts and instructions — that Medicare sends to participants. Part of her task is working through the information to make it more accessible.

Erickson also pointed out that Lt. Gov. Patty Judge will hold a town hall meeting on wellness and healthy living Tuesday from 5 to 7 p.m. at the Celebration Center at Friendship Haven.