

## '09 HealthCare Directory



NICK SIMONITE | ABJ

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Tom Richardson performs acupuncture for a patient at Seton's GoodHealth Commons, a center that provides complementary and alternative medicine and health classes and services.

## MEDICINE BY OTHER MEANS

Health insurers have started incorporating alternative practices into prevention and wellness services

KATE HARRINGTON | STAFF WRITER

**A**J. Wagner doesn't mince words: American health care is among the most expensive in the world, yet Americans make up one of the most unhealthy populations.

Wagner, the manager of community care, outreach and integrative medicine with the Seton Family of Hospitals, thinks Seton may be part of a trend to address that, though. The hospital system has launched GoodHealth Commons, a center that provides complementary and alternative medicine and health classes and services.

Seton isn't alone in trying to bring alternative health practices into

mainstream medicine in an effort to increase overall health and decrease health care costs. Throughout Central Texas, private practices, hospitals and insurers are incorporating practices such as acupuncture, natural childbirth and massage into a wider spectrum of health care.

"We're discovering through evidence-based research that from the conventional medicine perspective, we do acute care very well," Wagner said of the traditional Western medical health care model. "What we don't do very well is prevention and wellness. Too often we sit around and wonder, 'Mom and Dad had diabetes. When will I get it?' rather than, 'What

can I do to ensure I don't get it?'"

The goal of centers like GoodHealth Commons is to practice prevention and wellness through practices like acupuncture and massage, which Wagner said have been proven to reduce cholesterol, help lower blood pressure and reduce the risk of heart attacks.

And those treatments can translate to savings down the road if they help prevent costly events like a heart attack, something Wagner said Central Texas employers and insurers are starting to realize as well.

Some health insurance companies have started to incorporate alternative health into their services. Wag-

ner said Humana and Aetna now cover some alternative treatments, and the health plan that Seton provides for its own employees does also.

According to AARP's Policy & Research division, among the somewhat limited number of insurers that cover a range of alternative treatments, types of coverage vary dramatically from covering only chiropractic care to treatments like biofeedback, massage therapy and herbal remedies.

In Central Texas, another growing segment of alternative care is midwifery. While midwives have long practiced in the Austin area, their involvement in hospitals has come and gone according to hospital policy. One physicians group is looking to bring the two together again. OBGYN North, a private practice that practices exclusively at St. David's North Austin Medical Center and the new St. David's Women's Center of Texas, is the only OB/GYN practice in Austin to provide a midwife program.

Dr. Christina Sebestyn, a physician with that group, said when she did her medical training in Harvard University hospitals in Boston, it was a common practice to have midwives and doctors work side by side in delivery. Sebestyn said her practice focuses on the entire pregnancy being a healthy process, and on minimizing the number of Cesarean sections done on pregnant women.

According to a 2006 study in the *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice*, Cesarean section surgeries are rising globally and in the U.S. Some research concludes the typical cost of a C-section can rise much higher than that of a vaginal delivery. And Sebestyn said so far Austin-area mothers have enjoyed working with a team of doctors and midwives, instead of just one doctor who may or may not be on call when the mother goes into labor.