

Dr. Walter Janke – America’s Health Choice is the Most Recent Chapter in This Innovator’s History

by John Fries

Dr. Walter Janke is a true innovator. He’s a physician, inventor, open-heart pioneer, and – most recently – founder of America’s Health Choice Medical Plans, Inc., a Medicare+Choice HMO based in Vero Beach, Florida and serving Medicare eligible through out South Florida.

Janke, the son of a German father and Italian mother, was born in Peru, where his father had relocated to open a brewery. The younger Janke had an entrepreneurial spirit as well, but he found his calling in another field. He went to medical school, earned a medical degree with a specialty in cardiovascular thoracic surgery, and joined the medical staff at St. Joseph Hospital in Flint Michigan.

That’s an accomplishment in itself, but for Janke, it was only the beginning of the road. While at St. Joseph, he founded the Heart Institute of Michigan and served as its first director. He also performed the first coronary artery bypass procedure in Michigan. Then, he changed the course of medicine.

In 1973, Janke was asked to identify problematic areas associated with heart surgery. Janke provided several concepts that were built as prototypes. One of them, the Janke-Barron Heart Support, was first used in coronary bypass surgery in 1974. The device was patented in 1976.



Walter Janke, M.D., chairman and chief executive officer, and Lalita Janke, chief operating officer of America's Health Choice Medical Plans, Inc. The Medicare+Choice HMO is in its fourth successful year.

"The Janke-Barron Heart Support is used in coronary bypass surgery," said Janke. "In the beginning, it was used in about 30,000 surgeries a year. I couldn't begin to tell you how many surgeries it's used in today."

The Janke-Barron Heart Support was designed to provide access to the posterior surface of the heart. Made of nylon, in a net-like configuration, it conforms to the shape of the heart while distributing pressure in a way that reduces the possibility of damage to the muscle.

In 1974, Janke moved to Fort Lauderdale. "I wanted to develop a cardiovascular program in a region where none had existed," said Janke. "I even brought my own equipment." Soon, he had opened not one, but two such programs, first at Florida Medical Center and, later, at Holy Cross Hospital.

In 1988, Janke retired from medicine. He and his wife, Lalita, a retired financial planner, were living in Fort Lauderdale and operating a chain of flower shops and a plant leasing company. Then, Dr. and Mrs. Janke decided to buy a boat, a 42-foot trawler, and went on a five-year, non-stop cruise through out the Bahamas, during which they visited every island. "We went conch fishing and spear fishing, and planted mango and apple seeds on the islands we visited," recalled Mrs. Janke. In 1993, after returning to Fort Lauderdale they opened a primary care center in Boca Raton, and by 1998 they had expanded into 5 medical centers in the Treasure Coast of Florida. In 1998, a turning point occurred when Humana left the area, leaving more than 30,000 seniors without access to managed care," said Janke.

In the absence of a Humana center, Dr. and Mrs. Janke then made another major decision – to open South Florida's first primary care center to serve patients who belonged to Humana as well as other HMOs. To serve the needs of the patient population as thoroughly and efficiently as possible, they placed multiple-specialty physicians into the facility.

In 1996, the Janke's relocated to the Treasure Coast, and, between 1996 and 1998, they opened five more primary care centers. By the time 1998 arrived, they again found themselves exploring the possibility of retirement, and planned to devote their time to missionary work. However, Humana's managed care problems had continued, and the company finally made a decision to leave the area completely. Patients were approaching the Janke's and lamenting the loss of managed care. The Janke's wanted to provide access to care for seniors who couldn't afford it. To do that, in their estimation, that meant opening their own HMO.

According to Janke, the application process was complicated, to say the least." Getting licensed in the insurance industry is very difficult." First, the Janke's applied to the state of Florida for permission to open a PSO. This was a logical move; HMOs were failing, and President Clinton had recently introduced the PSO concept. However, the state legislature had no jurisdiction to grant a PSO, and Florida only had Medicare HMOs, not commercial ones. So, the Janke's had to re-file an application to open a Medicare+Choice HMO.

Then in July 2000, the Janke's launched America's Health Choice Medical Plans, Inc. The company started with 12 corporate employees in a 1,200-square-foot corporate office, and 24 employees at six primary care centers in the Treasure Coast of Florida.

Since opening, America's Health Choice has set itself apart from other HMOs in that it's been successful in containing medical costs while providing a high level of benefits to its members. America's Health Choice Medical Plans, Inc. emphasizes prevention, early disease detection, and treatment. However, there's another important component that guides the Jankes: "Our philosophy of patient care, as well as work, is very mind-body-spirit focused," said Mrs. Janke. "We treat the whole person. Before we hire a new employee, we talk extensively with him or her to ensure a strong comfort level with our approach."

Things continue to grow and thrive. As in 2000, Dr. Walter Janke serves as chairman and chief executive officer and Lalita serves as chief operating officer. Today, though, that staff of 12 has grown to nearly 500 employees with a medical staff of about 50 primary care physicians and specialists serving more than 15,000 members.

The HMO's network includes 32 well equipped and fully staffed medical centers in Broward, Brevard, Indian River, St. Lucie, Martin, Okeechobee, and Palm Beach counties, along with a large number of hospitals, specialists, and ancillary health care providers.

"We're opening centers every month," said Janke. "Because of our number of medical centers, patients have access to care seven days a week. The best thing about this is that we've been able to fill a need."

In June, the company completed its yearly audit and announced an increase in revenue by 33% in 2003 as compared to 71% in 2002 and 386% in 2001, respectively. The HMO is projecting a 37% increase in 2004, which will mark its fourth consecutive year of growth.

Also, this year, America's Health Choice was selected as a finalist for the South Florida Business Journal/Union Planters Bank's 2004 Business of the Year Award. The company was one of only six finalists in the health services category. When not at the office, Dr. and Mrs. Janke live in Vero Beach, and enjoy skin diving, gardening and an occasional tennis match.