

Bariatric Center Spotlight

Medical Weight Management

Tampa, Florida



WILLIAM C. DUDNEY III, MD

Dr. Dudney has practiced medicine and psychiatry on the West Coast, East Coast, Deep South, and the Caribbean. His specialty is eating disorders and cosmetic weight loss with modern medications.



**LISA DUDNEY, BSW
Nutritional Counselor**

Lisa provides individual nutritional counseling and diet planning to assist clients in adopting a healthy lifestyle.



**SHERIE VARNEY
Office Manager**

Sherie Varney has worked with Dr. Dudney since 1990 in this special clinic, knows all of the clients and is an invaluable source of information.

This month's Bariatric Center Spotlight focuses on Medical Weight Management, a clinic that offers psychiatric counseling and medical support for weight loss and management.

Please give a brief description of your facility and the services you offer.

Medical Weight Management is an outpatient clinic that is all private self-pay and provides a single specialty service in the field of medical bariatrics to treat patients whose chief complaint is being overweight. Typically, our patients come in feeling depressed, upset, hopeless, or frustrated about their inability to lose weight on their own with diet and exercise. Most patients are not yet ready to consider surgery for their obesity, but feel lost and abandoned in the medical system since the phen-fen scare. Patients are understandably and appropriately cautious about using prescription drugs to assist in weight loss, and they come to our clinic seeking a doctor with experience and knowledge in psychopharmacology.

The clinic combines psychiatric counseling with the medication management of weight-related issues, including eating disorders (e.g., bulimia and anorexia), and also treats weight gain associated with certain prescription medications, such as antidepressants, steroids, and hormones. Through a combination of medication adjustment, appetite suppressants, nutritional counseling, and psychotherapy directed at body image, patients are guided to their goal of healthier body weight.

Every patient is seen by William C. Dudney, III, MD, the medical director, who is a medical doctor

and board-certified psychiatrist, on every visit—usually at two-week intervals.

The initial work-up includes:

- baseline body fat percentage measurement
- estimate of baseline metabolic rate
- nutritional counseling as needed
- full laboratory blood panel
- medical interview and examination by Dr. Dudney.

Following the initial visit, patients typically return every two weeks for further treatment, which includes weigh-in, blood pressure check, mental status evaluation, mood assessment, and medication changes. Frequent areas of inquiry include new food cravings, sleep patterns, irritability and fatigue from dieting, binge eating for comfort, change in work and home stressors, and reactions of family and peers to noticeable weight loss.

Patients who do well and steadily lose 1.5 to 3 pounds per week may spread the return visits to every four weeks, especially if a long commute is involved. Those who struggle and don't do as well return weekly, and especially difficult or resistant patients may come several times a week, and even daily if necessary.

One of the unusual aspects of the practice is the disassociation between fees and frequency of visits. Patients pay a single monthly fee, regardless of the number of visits during that month. This means patients who are having trouble can receive extra help and still stay

within their budget, which is significant in a private-pay situation.

The clinic is located in a lushly landscaped residential area near downtown Tampa, Florida. The facility is an older single-story stucco structure modified for medical use, but it retains a home-like ambiance, has off-street parking and privacy hedges, and its size is approximately 1,800 square feet.

Tell us about the roles and responsibilities of your staff at your facility.

The staff at Medical Weight Management consists of the medical director and clinic owner, Dr. Dudney, the office manager, Sherrie Varney, and Lisa Dudney, a psychiatric social worker who provides clinical and nutritional counseling to the patients.

Who manages your facility, including scheduling and inventory?

Ms. Varney handles scheduling, general business operations, and inventory. At each patient visit, Ms. Varney greets the patient by name, pulls the chart, and escorts him or her to one of the three treatment rooms. Ms. Varney does not double-book or overbook appointments, so time in the waiting room, which is furnished like an elegant turn of the century home, is kept to a minimum. Dr. Dudney or Mrs. Dudney generally see patients straight through from 7AM until 2PM Monday through Thursday, leaving late afternoons and Fridays to catch up on non-clin-

ical duties. Ms. Varney also handles all inventory and ordering.

Ms. Varney's responsibilities require good people skills and an interest in business accuracy, which can be a very tall order. The procedures and the environment Dr. Dudley has established enable the clinic to maintain a small staff. Because the clinic is a private self-pay facility, the staff is never forced to chase paper trails with insurance companies or old accounts. As a result, the staff at Medical Weight Management is able to spend more time with the patients.

Do you use a particular software package for scheduling?

We tried and discarded computer-based scheduling and accounting. For our clinic, old fashioned pencil and paper systems are faster, more accurate, and easier to flex.

What prescriptions and vitamin or nutritional supplements do you utilize regularly?

Eighty-five percent of our patients take appetite suppressants (phentermine, diethylpropion, phendimetrazine, Meridia, and others); 20 to 25 percent take antidepressants, primarily Wellbutrin or Effexor, but some can still lose weight on low doses or combinations of traditional first-line SSRIs, such as Prozac, Zoloft, Paxil, Celexa or Lexapro; about 15 percent of our patients have

How many patients are treated at your facility? What are their expectations?

The clinic has about 200 patient visits a month. Eighty-five percent of our patients are women, and most patients fall between the ages of 25 and 55. The majority of patients want to lose weight—between 30 and 60 pounds—although some are very obese and need to lose over 100 pounds.

All patients are primarily cosmetically concerned, but about 20 percent also have medical complications due to obesity, such as diabetes or hypertension, and 15 percent have hypothyroidism. In addition to offering patients personally tailored weight-management programs, we also provide preoperative psychiatric assessments for several bariatric surgery programs in the area. We even treat patients who have gained weight back years after surgery but who are not candidates for reoperation.

A significant number of our patients have mixed diagnoses of mood disorders and eating disorders, such as binge eating, bulimia, and anorexia. We help patients with psychiatric treatment as well as nutritional issues, and if the primary care or referring psychiatrist requests it we become the manager of future maintenance psychiatric medications, such as lithium. Some patients reach their weight goals

“We want our patients to be educated before they arrive so they know what to expect, and the website has been instrumental in making this happen.”

abnormal thyroid tests and take replacement hormones; and 10 to 20 percent use medications to lower fat absorption or lower cholesterol. Many patients are on a combination of these and other medications. Special care is given to adjust the medications to the minimum effective dose in obese patients with hypertension, blood sugar, or cholesterol problems. Use of megadose or mineral/vitamin cocktails beyond a general oral multivitamin is discouraged, and health food-store type supplements are not used.

and develop other goals more related to mental health management, such as reducing the frequency of relapsing depression or related chemical dependency.

How does your website benefit your clinic?

We include clear and complete information about payment and services right on our website, and this has also helped differentiate us from our competitors. By having everything right there for patients to see in advance, we are able to set



Medical Weight Management is Dr. Dudley's private, exclusive medical clinic specializing in weight control in a confidential and comfortable practice in South Tampa's SoHo / Hyde Park area.

initial patient visits more quickly without trying to sell our services or explain fees over the phone. We want our patients to be educated before they arrive so they know what to expect, and the website has been instrumental in making this happen. For example, from the website, patients now know in advance that we can treat them even if they are taking other medications, such as anti-anxiety drugs or mood stabilizers. Before the launch of our website, some patients told us they did not come in because they thought their blood pressure was too high or that their diabetes precluded medications for weight control. The website helps get the doctor-patient

We have no plans to expand. Dr. Dudley, however, currently admits general psychiatric patients through the emergency room at a nearby general hospital. The hospital work helps keep him grounded with the medical community. It is too easy to become isolated from new medical ideas and issues if a physician stays in an office all day. Dr. Dudley's work with the hospital keeps him abreast of what his colleagues are doing, what their political worries are, and so forth. It helps to step back from one's office and see the greater medical arena, especially here in Florida, where malpractice issues especially are so critical.

How has managed care affected your facility and the care it provides patients?

Managed care is unable to provide the services Dr. Dudley's patients need. It is too easy to call medical weight management “cosmetic” and “elective;” therefore, Dr. Dudley delivers care to his patients outside the managed system. It is a business relationship between the patient and Dr. Dudley only, which is a great fit because of privacy and confidentiality concerns.

Because insurance companies tend to restrict the number and types of visits reimbursable for weight management, in 1992 Medical Weight Management eliminated all third-party payments, and each patient now pays at the time of service. There are no accounts receivable and no correspondence with insurance companies, which allows the staff to stay small and personally involved with each patient. There are no “back offices”

relationship off to the right start. Explaining the program to an unfamiliar caller always seemed too much like “selling something over the phone” rather than explaining the type of medical treatment we provide. Patients now can learn online about our practice philosophy before they call to schedule an appointment.

Has your facility recently expanded in size and patient volume? Will it be expanding in the near future?

where clerks file forms and plead for insurance authorization. Fees are clearly displayed on the website at www.drududney.com.

What efforts do you make to maintain HIPAA compliance?

We do not transmit medical information to third parties, electronic or otherwise.

How are new employees oriented and trained at your facility? How do you retain, motivate, and evaluate staff?

Because it is a small, family style business, we have no turnover. Our staff sees grateful and happily improving patients every day, and that feedback keeps us on track. The clinical staff is evaluated based on outcomes and patient satisfaction.

Does your facility utilize any alternative therapies?

We have decided not to expand into related areas. The clinic does not try to be a one-stop shop like some weight loss institutions that expand into hair removal, Botox, laser peels, vein removal, and so forth, nor do we use techniques in categories we consider “smoke and mirrors,” such as food supplements, mesotherapy injections, hypnosis, vitamin sales gimmicks, herbals, exercise machines, or cellulite massage.

What quality control assurance measures are practiced in your facility?

We carefully follow and track any areas of patient dissatisfaction or complaint. The style of our practice enables Dr. Dudney to return patient calls the same day. Our office manager doesn't have to delegate inventory management or supervise or train short-term employees.

What trends do you see emerging?

There are many exciting areas of pharmaceutical research that are working to benefit weight control patients. Leptin, neuro-proteins, and newly proposed gut-brain interactions are all areas ripe for pharmaceutical intervention and experimentation. Many new animal models

for obesity are being proposed, and the market forces that drive new drug development are definitely present.

There are many overweight people who would like to have a new pharmacological treatment to help them lose weight, and there is no shortage of state and federal agencies that want to reduce the projected costs of diabetes, joint replacements, and so forth by slimming down the covered population. The ability to participate in these kinds of new drug trials would be a desirable area for us.

What makes your facility unique?

Our clinic is unique because we operate with a psychiatric understanding of the many emotional issues that accompany obesity and eating disorders. By combining psychiatric counseling with the medication management of weight-related issues, we can help our patients lose weight while identifying and treating the root causes of their weight struggles. ■