

Primary Care Cures

Episode 60: Cal Fussman

- Ron Barshop: You know, most problems in healthcare are fixed already. Primary care is already cured on the fringes, reversing burnout, physician shortages, bad business models, forced buyouts, factory medicine, high-deductible insurance that squeezes the docs and is totally inaccessible to most of the employees.
- Ron Barshop: The big squeeze is always on for docs. It's the acceleration of costs, and the deceleration of reimbursements. I want you to meet those on this show that are making a difference with host Ron Barshop, CEO of Beacon Clinics. That's me.
- Ron Barshop: My personal mission statement is three words long, I am light, and we'll get back to that. Now last month I gave my first public speech in 40 years. The previous one was to my graduating class at UT Austin, and the year before that I gave one there too. It was a big crowd, but put the fear of God into me for 40 years. Well, this time in January, last month, I was a guest at this show Uli Chettipally put on called the Innovation MD Summit, and something strange happened after my talk. A group of us were handling a Q&A, and I was getting a lot more attention than the vascular surgeon next to me. My talk was blasting a myth that the triple aim is not achievable.
- Ron Barshop: Now the triple aim for those of you who want to know what that is, is you can't have all three of these things: happy patients, population health, or lower costs. One is going to suffer. And I said in my talk, we're way past triple aim with direct primary care. In fact, we're way past quintuple aim, where at sextuple aim. And before I can explain, the vascular surgeon wrestled the microwave from me and said, "I'm dealing with a real world here, unlike Snow White on my right." And she wasn't being subtle, I'm pretty sure she's from Brooklyn, like my guest today. You all would be very proud of me that I didn't scrap in the dirt like I should have had I been in Brooklyn. Remember, I am light. I told I'd get back to that. I said, I'm living in a future where everybody wins, the patient and the doctor, and the employees and the employers, and population health and costs decline. There's this sextuple aim. So I had officially blown the mind of my vascular surgeon friend and she had some attachment to a world where not everybody wins. And this is the thing, I am light.

Ron Barshop: I tell you this story because Walmart is shaving \$1 billion off their health care spending by using direct contracting with centers of excellence, and they didn't have to sell \$96 billion in equivalent goods to get that billion to the bottom line. In other words, they didn't have to build 1,471 stores last year to drop a billion to their bottom line because they found buried treasure in their healthcare spend.

Ron Barshop: 99% of American companies have buried treasure in their healthcare spend, just like Walmart and in accounting, they call this unrealized gains or profits. So today the new hero is the HR director or VP, it's the CFO, it's the CEO championing this new cool golden shovel because these three types of folks are recovering buried treasure in the health care spend by paying for a new shift in employee benefits. And it's a toolkit that we'll be talking a lot about this year, which includes direct primary care and other things. Everybody wins by the step bloat and wasted administrative burdens that we didn't create or even get a vote on. So we walk away from the old ways with our pocketbooks and we vote.

Ron Barshop: I'm betting you're going to vote my next guest as your favorite old time guest. He's no doctor, he's not even Kevin the manager, but now you know I'm talking about Cal Fussman and he's not even a thought leader in healthcare. He's not even in our field of health care, but he's spoken a lot to good folks like Kaiser Permanente. He's spoken to many of the hospital associations and he's on the short list for many others. And I could not be more pleased to introduce you lucky devils to this brilliant Cal Fussman who's a New York times bestselling author, a long time award-winning Esquire writer, a corporate consultant, extraordinaire and host of the Big Questions Podcast. And at the end of the question, I'm going to save Cal from my surprise question by telling you what his banner would say because I know what it'll say if he's flying it over America, it'll say change your questions, change your life. And that is his link to our primary care cures world today.

Ron Barshop: Cal asked my son to join Larry King's breakfast table in LA that he have been hosting for a long, long time. And that touched me right into my soul. And so I'm excited to have you see how he can touch your soul today too. Not only has he spoken to Kaiser in these state hospital associations with General Motors, Apple Music, Facebook, Pixar, Samsung, and Nike, Dell, the list goes on and on and on. All right, so why should we care about this story today? The big questions. Well, let's ask Cal Fussman. Cal, why should we care about the big questions in healthcare?

Cal Fussman: I couldn't think of a place that would be better served by some big question.

Ron Barshop: That's so true.

Cal Fussman: Let's look at it this way, you're going to get me started right off the bat, give me a little introduction later on, but I need an explanation. You see, I go into grocery store and if I want a gallon of milk, I walk up to the dairy section. I can see all the milks, I can see all the prices and I can make a choice and I could walk out and then I can go to the cashier and she's going to tap a few keys, ask me for a certain amount of money, I'm going to pay up and I'm going to leave a happy camper. When you think about health care, it's sort of like going to get a quarter milk and you pick it up and you go down to the register and you're told, "Just take it. Don't worry. We'll tell you how much it's going to cost in a few weeks or a month or so." And it really has open my eyes because we got to start asking ourselves the question, why is the system the way it is?

Ron Barshop: That's so true, Cal. Look, everybody has a personal story about health care. It's extremely personal, especially when it's your family or yourself involved or your pocketbook because it not only affects something deeply personal like our health, but it affects our finances. And there used to be a compact back in the day where you go into the nest of an employer and you felt safe, not only financially, but you felt safe medically. You knew you were going to be taken care of when you had good health insurance, but something changed along the way, didn't it?

Cal Fussman: Yeah, and I don't know where this lack of transparency came from, but I think that it's hurting everybody. And I think that we got to start asking some questions wherever we are in health care, because it just seems like even when I speak at hospitals, I'm finding out that of course you got privacy laws, HIPAA laws, but quite often there are amazing stories going on in hospitals that we just never hear about. And I say we as a public, but even worse, people who are working in the hospitals often don't hear about amazing things happening in their own hospitals. There's this idea that, well, this is what we're supposed to do, we go into work and we save lives.

Cal Fussman: But my feeling is that almost wherever you look in health care, if you start asking questions like, why aren't you letting the great stories about what you do become more known? We got to pay attention to those answers because I think it's important those stories to get out. And I also think it's important to ask questions about physicians, and they're in a very vulnerable place. It's not a secret because what I've been told is that literally if you look at the numbers, every day a physician commit suicide. There's so much stress on these physicians and they're not allowed to be vulnerable. And I think we got to start asking questions about that. How do we give physicians a space to be vulnerable, even if it's among themselves, to just push aside some of the tension that's on their shoulders.

Ron Barshop: So Cal, we have booked a guest that is a worldwide expert on sham peer reviews. I didn't know what that was this morning when I woke up, but I

do today. A sham peer review means ... Let me give you an example of a doctor. She was an ER doctor. She's a beautiful lady and a very smart lady and she was working alone in her shift, and there was no security guard. And what police do in her town is if somebody has an alcohol problem, they cannot book them and put them in jail because it's not a drunk tank, it's not a dry tank. Instead, they take them to the ER. And they took this extremely violent man, much larger than her into the ER. And she said, "Where's security?" And she starts calling security because he starts assaulting her and there's no security. In fact, there's no protocol for this.

Ron Barshop: So she wrote an email immediately after the incident to the right people at her hospital and they immediately started getting videotape of nurses saying it wasn't that bad. She's a little bit crazy. She smelled like alcohol that morning when she came in. A sham peer review is done, I don't know, maybe daily when somebody makes trouble in the hospital. And what they do is they run you out of your, not only just out of the hospital, they run you out of your career. So she got called in front of the right guy, we'll just say, we're not going to name names or companies, or even ideas who she talked to, but she talked to the right guy and he said, "You should've come to me directly and not written that email. We now have something on record we don't want on record."

Ron Barshop: And he didn't tell her that she was building a case, but she called her mentor and the mentor said, "You need to start looking for a job immediately. You need to put on your happy face. You need to complain not one more time in the next 90 days while you're looking for a job and you need to get the hell out of there." And she told me that my expert that she has referred me to is going to tell us that that is one of the leading causes of suicide because not only do you not have a career at that hospital, you have no career in medicine because you are a troublemaker.

Cal Fussman: Oh man.

Ron Barshop: Did you know that?

Cal Fussman: I did not know about this at all. This is crazy. This is absolutely nuts.

Ron Barshop: It's made up stuff and everybody rallies around the hospital because you don't want to lose your job and you don't want to be next, but it's a target assassination. Now, gentlemen won the \$5.5 million lawsuit a few years ago and another woman won one for \$4 million this year fighting it. But it took one guy 19 years and let's do 4.4 million divided by 20 years. It's not a lot of money compared to what he could have earned or 5.5 million, but in the end, you have to go work for an insurance company and answer telephones. You have to do a shift just like a sophisticated medical assistant. You can't operate as a doctor when your license is pulled and

your career is pulled and you spent \$230,000-\$350,000 to get that degree for the privilege of serving people and now all that debt is hanging over you and you have nowhere to go. How about that?

Cal Fussman: That's just startling to me. You know, it reminds me of the expression, Ron, "A reputation is earned in drops and lost in buckets." And when somebody is faced with just losing their reputation and not being able to find a job, you could understand the level of tension on that person, especially if they owed a huge amount of money. I mean, is this a common thing? Because I had never heard of this before.

Ron Barshop: I was sitting at that conference I referenced earlier in California and there were seven doctors sitting around me and they were all nodding their heads. This the pressure they have on us.

Cal Fussman: Oh man. Well, what I'm doing, I'm going out to speak in Florida next week to a group of physicians and I'm not even going to speak, I'm just going to ask some questions. I need to know what is going on because we're in a place where we have to care for the people who are caring for others. It's that simple. And if we don't take care of those people, who's going to take care of us down the road?

Ron Barshop: That's the best question. That is a great question.

Cal Fussman: Well, the more you can educate me, the more I'll appreciate it. Maybe I should start interviewing you, Ron.

Ron Barshop: Well Cal, you're the best and I would have to wear my steel armor. Actually, that's not true, you're a great interviewer and you feel like you're your best friend in the first three minutes because you're professional. You know exactly what you're doing.

Cal Fussman: I tried to get to the essence of people and I think that's one of the reasons that people come to trust me over the years.

Ron Barshop: Well and you're a sweet guy and then really it's cool to have watched how you reinvented yourself. You have won from a world class writer that everybody is excited to be interviewed by to a consultant now and you helped my chapter in Houston with entrepreneur organization and for those of you who are listening, what a speaker, he got rated a 10 on all stripes. So this is a guy that you want to come have a speak to your chapter. But what Cal talks about is he makes you think and he makes you laugh and he makes you wonder why you can't convert your life into a better series of questions that will change your life.

Ron Barshop: Cal, I've been watching your career for a while and I've been following everything. I got to tell you, I think I have about 10 favorite stories, but I want to kind of start with your favorite bus ride you ever took in Brazil. Can you tell the story about how you became a nomad for 10 years and that resulted in an amazing bus ride to Brazil to the middle of nowhere and what happened on that bus?

Cal Fussman: All right, well, this would have to start back as a young man. I had grown up wanting to be a newspaper columnist back in the day where that really meant something. Being a columnist for big city paper was like better than being the mayor. You went out and saw all the great sporting events and knew all the important people and having great conversations in bars at the end of the day. And that's what I wanted to do. And actually by the age of about 23 I had achieved that. And then I was invited to go to work at a magazine in New York. It was amazing magazine called Inside Sports. It was created to compete with Sports Illustrated. It was just phenomenal talent and it wasn't even a job. Everyday was an event and you'd show up and the gonzo journalist, Hunter S. Thompson would be at the bar after work. Pulitzer Prize winners would come in. Like I'd be sent out to Pittsburgh to interview the Steelers while they're going after their fifth Super Bowl ring.

Cal Fussman: And it was heaven, except for one thing. While the magazine was a commercial success, it wasn't such financially. So it went belly up and I didn't quite know what to do. So I thought, you know what? Let me take some time off and just try and figure this out. So I call up my mom and dad and I say, "You know, I'm going to just do a little traveling, go around the world for a little while." And my mom says, oh, she's always very supportive, "That sounds great! Wonderful!" Little did she know when I said it that I wasn't coming back for 10 years, and this trip took me around the world and it took me in a very peculiar way because of four words, and those four words were, I had no money or very little money. And so this is how the trip unfolded.

Cal Fussman: I would go to train stations or bus stations and just ask for a ticket to the next destination. Didn't matter to me where it was going. What mattered to me was the trip down the aisle. So I'm walking down the aisle and I'm looking for an empty seat, a specific empty seat, empty seat next to somebody who it looks like I can trust, somebody who might be able to trust me because by the end of the trip, a conversation will have started and when that train stops, I basically need that person to invite me home because otherwise I got no roof over my head.

Cal Fussman: I'll tell you how seriously I took this run. If I'm walking down that aisle and I see a beautiful woman, she's got no rings on her fingers, she's smiling at me. It could be a supermodel, I would just walk right on by

because let's face it, there was no way to see what was taking me home. And I guess you're not able to see me, but I'm just not the kind of guy that walks into a bar and just gets taken home by somebody. So for me the most important thing was to find that trustworthy person. And you know, if it was a 93-year-old Hungarian grandma, toothless, eating crackers out of a purse, that was fine.

Cal Fussman: And so I would go up to the back of the train, I would sit down next to grandma, train will start rolling, and I would turn to her and say something like, "What makes a great goulash?" And of course she didn't speak English and I didn't know how to speak much Hungarian, and so we're just articulating back and forth. It's like a game of charades. But fortunately at the time, there were a lot of young people who were learning English. This is before the Berlin wall came down and they always were attracted to these conversations, like metal filings to a magnet. Like, he wants to know what makes a great goulash.

Cal Fussman: And now, you see grandma's chest start to swell. Oh, tell them what makes a great goulash, and she's talking about her mother's goulash and her goulash and the care and the love and the ingredients she puts in. And then she turns to these young people who are translating. She says, "You know, I've been on this train for more than half a century and I've seen some of you on the same train from time to time, not one of you has ever asked about my goulash. But this guy travels from thousands of kilometers away because he knows enough to find out about my goulash. And you tell him he's coming home with me."

Cal Fussman: Well, train stops, when all of us get off and grandma's in high gears, she takes me back to the house, she's calling her friends, relatives. And the next day, the next night, they're all around me. I'm sitting at the head of grandma's table while I lift up grandma's goulash for the first time. Slowly it comes up to my lips and then my eye shut and my cheeks lift with rapture and the crowd goes wild, "He loves grandma's goulash!"

Cal Fussman: Well, a four-day party breaks out during which time another guy comes over to me and he says, "By the way, have you ever tasted apricot schnapps? Because my father, he makes the best homemade apricots schnapps you're ever going to taste, lives 45 minutes from here, you've got to come and try it. Okay, I say. We all go over after grandma's party to taste the apricot schnapps and another party breaks out. This one, about six days during which time somebody else comes over to me and asked me if I'd ever seen the paprika capital of the world, Szeged, Hungary. Oh, and he takes me to Szeged, Hungary because I cannot leave without visiting Szeged as his guests. Basically, that's how I got around the world. Just pass dinner table to dinner table to dinner table for 10 years until one day I

get asked by Washington Post Sunday magazine to find the best beach in South America because that's where I was traveling at the time.

Cal Fussman: So I go up to a city called Fortaleza because I had about this magical beach called Jericoacoara. It was like another place out of another time. Sand like the Sahara, the most beautiful parts of the Sahara, those dunes up against crystalline waters of the Caribbean. They didn't even take money I heard. You went with a sack of rice on your shoulder and you needed to get there by mule back and a crude sailing vessel.

Cal Fussman: I went up to look for this place and just as I got to the nearest city, as fate would have it, the first travel industry tour to Jericoacoara had just been started, and the first trip by bus was leaving on Friday at midnight. So I get one of the seats, I got a few days to wait and little did I know that on that Friday a woman would call up this agency and said, "I'd like a ticket to Jericoacoara." And she's told, "Oh, I'm sorry, we're all sold out." And she said, "But I got to go." And the guy says, "Well, you're going to have to wait two weeks, the next trip." "No, no, I got to go tonight. If somebody cancels, can I get that seat?" "Sure, we'll call you back." Well, she doesn't wait. Every hour, on the hour, she calls back, "Any tickets left? Any tickets left? Anyone cancel? Anyone cancel?" No, no, no, no.

Cal Fussman: Finally, at like 10 o'clock at night, she calls and says, "Any tickets left?" And the guy says, "No, but you know what? I can tell you want to go to Jericoacoara very badly. So you know what? How about this? For half price, you can get a seat in the aisle." "Great," she says. So at midnight, everybody's boarding the bus, I take a seat on the aisle in the middle and just before the doors closed, it's complete darkness, this woman, it's silhouette, I couldn't even see her face. Just a silhouette comes up the steps, walks down the aisle and just stands next to me. And I looked up in that moment in the darkness and I knew there she is, and we'd been married for 27 years now, three kids. And that's how I got to the bus in Brazil.

Ron Barshop: Cal, I'm smiling ear to ear because I've heard the story a few times and it just gets better every time. You spent an elaborate chunk of your life, Cal, getting one solid punch in on a famous fighter. Tell me about why you wanted to get in the ring with that guy. What your strategy was to get your one good punch in, and how long did you work towards that one good punch?

Cal Fussman: Okay, so the guy you're talking about, Julio Cesar Chavez. You know, I'm looking in my office. I'm so proud of that punch that I actually blew up a photo of me landing this punch so that it's like the sizeable wall because it's one of my great accomplishments in life, and it goes back to a time when I was a kid and I love boxing and I decided to enter the New York

Golden Gloves. You've got to be 16. I never had trained. I didn't really know how to box. So I went to a gym, an old timer came up to me, looked at me, said, "Hey kid, you like you don't know what you're doing. You got to take a year and like I'll train you, I'll show you how to throw a jab and a right hand, how to duck and move and footwork." And I said to him, "No, no, no, no, no, no, I'm ready to fight now. I'm going to Golden Gloves." And the golden gloves were only like a couple of months away.

Cal Fussman: And so when I get into the Golden Gloves, I quickly discovered this trainer was right because the guy that I am suddenly on the scale next to looks like he's had about 120 fights before, and I know, uh-oh, this could be some trouble. And then as I'm going into the ring, there were 5,000 people and for whatever reason the crowd just exploded as I came into the ring. And I couldn't really believe where I was and I almost, I don't know what it was, you just lose track of what's going on. I've never done it before. And basically in the first round I'm like looking around, this just pops me and knocks me down. And the next thing I know I see a hand with five fingers outstretched and another with one finger. And then the first thing I hear is like, "Six, seven, eight."

Cal Fussman: I get to my feet and now I'm kind of awake and I'm looking around and I see this guy coming at me. His right hand comes back to hit me again, but the bell rings. I'm saved by the bell and I go back to the corner and I said, "You know what? I can handle this because I could hit a punching bag with a fury for three minutes straight and all I had to do was just throw punches." And I'm telling myself, just go out there, throw punches, throw punches, throw punches. In the meantime, the referee has come over to see how I'm doing and he's asking, "How are you doing, Cal?" Or he didn't know my name and I'm not answering him because basically I'm knocked out. So referee stops the fight.

Cal Fussman: My dad's in the crowd, he's brought his friends. It's a humiliating moment, which turns into this family story so that anybody who comes in from out of town and is introduced to me, first thing they hear, "Hey, you ever hear a story of Cal in the Golden Gloves?" So this goes on and on and on for years, for years from the time I was 16 until the point where I take that woman that I've met on the bus home and I'm going to marry her. Well, what do you think? She speaks Portuguese. She doesn't even speak English. What do you think the first thing she hears from my family? "Hey, do you ever hear the story of Cal in the Golden Gloves?" So they explain it to her pretty well and not long after that I'm sitting down on a sofa, a pretzel in one hand and a beer and the other, and Julio Cesar Chavez is undefeated, just about as many knockouts as he's had fights is on the screen and he's going in for the knockout and I'm saying, "Finish him off! Finish him off!" And my wife hears it and says, "Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. I heard about you in the Golden Gloves."

Cal Fussman: And I realize in that moment, Ron, that oh man, one day I'm going to have a son or a daughter and they are going to hear this story. I got to redeem myself. So I turned to my wife and I said, "You see that guy on a screen, Julio Cesar Chavez, he's like one of the greatest fighters of all time. I'm going to fight that guy." I was a magazine writer. So in my head I knew, hey, this has a pretty good chance to sell in a story, Cal versus one of the great fighters of all time.

Cal Fussman: I was working at GQ magazine at the time. I went into David Granger, who was my editor and he got the story sold. And for about six months I trained at the Time Square gym In New York to get in the ring with Julio Cesar Chavez. Now the beating that I took in this six months was pretty incredible, but started to learn how to fight. Now, of course, after this six months I'm feeling really good.

Cal Fussman: And finally my trainer who had fought four world championship turned to me and said, "Cal, like, you know what? I got to give you credit. You really came a long way, but you don't understand. Like now, you're ready to be an amateur. That's way different from being a professional. And that's way different from being the best of the best of the professionals. You will not get a glove on Julio Cesar Chavez. And if he wants to finish this in two seconds, he's going to do it. So I don't know if you're going to get a chance, but who knows? Maybe he'll go in and just want to see what you got and you'll get some kind of chance. So this is what I want you to do. I want you to go in and I want you to throw a left jab and then a right, and then a left hook and he's going to catch them very easily. And I want you to do it again. Left jab, right hand, left hook, and he's going to catch them again. And I want you to move around. I want you to throw those same three punches in the same speed over and over and over. Left jab, right hand, left hook."

Cal Fussman: And so I get in the ring, I'm moving around, left, right, left hook, left, right, left hook, he's catching it, he's catching it, catching it. What Harold told me was, if you're still around after about the 17th time you do that, I want you to throw left, right, and then come back with another, right. And so we're moving around just like Harold taught. And after the 17th time, I go left, right, and boom! I catch him right at the jaw. He kind of staggers back in the ropes. He looks at me and said, "All right, all right, that's what you want." And then he starts coming after me and now I am just running around in the ring like it's in a cartoon. And he hits me to the body with one left hook. That was his famous shot. I mean it felt like a Hoover vacuum cleaner hose, it was stuffed down my throat, down my esophagus. And then the switch was turned on and my whole stomach was pulled into the vacuum cleaner, at which time we had the president of the World Boxing Council there. He's signaling to the guy with the bell like, "Ring the bell! Ring the bell! Cal's going to get killed."

Cal Fussman: He ring the bell. I survived the round. I didn't go down, I go back to the corner. My face is blue and I should've mentioned this was up in the mountains of Toluca, Mexico. So basically all the training I had done in six months was just wiped away by the altitude. But in that moment, Julio turned to me and he said, “[inaudible 00:32:34], you want another round?” And I looked at him and I said, “[foreign language 00:32:40] ” And then we did another round, and I got beat up a little bit there, but the photos on the wall, I can see me landing that shot.

Ron Barshop: You spent six months of your life to get a shot in on a guy to bring back your reputation for your children. What a nice story that is.

Cal Fussman: You know what? And it wraps around to the beginning of the conversation about your reputation and how important that is to you. And so you have to protect your reputation at all costs and it's a reason also that I think that physicians need to be given a space among themselves to be vulnerable so that they can talk out any difficult feelings that they have. Because there's just no reason that excess stress should be put on the shoulders of people who have to wake up every day to care for others.

Ron Barshop: Cal, it's so sad to tell you this, but most physicians the day they get that counseling or have that conversation or have that intimate talk with clergy, they go right back into the meat grinder the next hour and they're just chewed up again all over. It's not as if people aren't trying to do this and deal with burnout, which is over 65% of doctors, particularly in primary care, [inaudible 00:34:12] this show is about, but more so it's just a bad model.

Ron Barshop: The meat grinders is the meat grinders, the meat grinder until I discovered on this show a new way that everybody wins. And we talked about it at the top of the show and we're going to talk about it in the next interview we're going to do because I know your time is precious to you. So I want to kind of wrap up and ask what is the best way for people to find Cal Fussman if they want you to come speak or consult in their company and help them out.

Cal Fussman: Cal Fussman, C-A-L-F-U-S-S like in Sam, double Sam, M-A-N, calfussman.com. Just go to calfussman.com and you'll see there's a place where you can leave a message and it'll get routed straight through to me.

Ron Barshop: Well Cal, I'm going to thank you for coming to the show and we're going to be bringing you back in the next show, in a part two of this. So thank you again for your time. We really appreciate it.