

Health Advocacy Field Growing Professionals Make Sense of Care Options for Patients

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Cathy's worries about her husband's lung cancer sent her seeking the help of a professional outside of his doctor's office. She wanted to make sure he was getting the proper treatment and wanted to get a second opinion, but she didn't know from how or where. So she turned to a professional medical liaison for help. Jane Geer, principal of Arnold-based Healthcare Know-How, acts as a link between patients and their physicians.

"At a time when you have decisions to make in a short time period, it's great to have someone like her to come and find the right path we needed to take," said Cathy of Annapolis, who didn't want her last name used because of medical-privacy issues. "Everyone needs (advocacy) with these difficult decisions. If you don't have a clinician in the family or someone to give insight as to what is going on, you need someone that is available and experienced to help you."

Businesses similar to Ms. Geer's are becoming popular around the country as more people try to understand their health-care options. These health advocates are available for a variety of services, including questioning doctors, reviewing prescription forms and insurance information.

University of Maryland College Park's new School of Public Health will offer some training in the field through its master's of public health degree. Locally, Anne Arundel Medical Center has patient advocates on staff to help with patient concerns.

The field also is offered as a discipline at colleges and universities. Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, N.Y., offers a master's program in health advocacy. Students enrolled in the program have worked as patient representatives, educators and health advisers. In 2004, Stanford University added a similar program. Cleveland State University offers an advocacy certificate program that can be earned online and the New York University School of Medicine also offers elective classes in patient advocacy.

From his office in New York, H. Kenneth Schueler counsels clients from around the country and the world. He became an advocate in 2000 after a battle with lymphoma. It was then that he realized patients had a variety of needs that they are unable to handle on their own. In the

years since Mr. Schueler's been operating HKS Patient Advocates, he said he's received calls from others trying to do the same thing.

"(The experience) made me realize that a patient going through a life-threatening disease like cancer ... they don't really have the energy or resources to manage their care and look around for second opinions," Mr. Schueler said. "It's a complicated, difficult world."

Ms. Geer agreed. "I have known for a long time that things are getting more complicated, more fragmented," she said. "Patient care is not patient-centric. People are so confused that they don't know where to begin."

Ms. Geer's work in the health care industry goes back to when she worked in high school as a volunteer. She became a registered nurse and has worked in several different areas of the industry, including hospitals, home care and with providers and insurers.

She started Healthcare Know-How two years ago as a way to focus on patients. Since then, she's worked with about 100 patients. Ms. Geer's services include acting as a representative for insurance appeals, consultations and interpreting documents for patients. She works in the Maryland, Washington and northern Virginia and charges between \$75 to \$125 per hour, depending on the service, she said.

"What I do is so broad that it could touch anybody, anywhere anytime," she said. "Just like people have to go to the grocery store, they have to have health care. What this does for me is it takes all the years that I've amassed (in the health care industry) and allowed me to turn it over and put it to use for people's well-being and optimal health care. And that's what I really love about it."

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