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In the patients' corner

line line By Mark Hansel Las Vegas Sun

The long and winding road that sometimes passes through the medical landscape can be difficult, if not impossible, for patients to traverse.

The insurance quagmire of HMOs, PPOs, partial coverage and the like can give anyone a headache - which may or may not be covered.

Add the difficulty patients sometimes have obtaining and understanding information from doctors, and the challenge can become overwhelming, particularly for someone facing a serious illness.

More and more people nationwide are turning to professional patient advocates to help guide them through the medical minefield. The advocate acts as a liaison between patients, health care professionals and insurance companies, helping patients get proper care and coverage during their illness or injury.

And just knowing that a patient is represented by an advocate can sometimes make a big difference in the quality of care a patient receives, advocates say.

Kent Divich, a local real estate investor, suffered a back injury last December. He went to three valley hospitals, he said, but after prolonged waits at each, did not even see a doctor. Finally, after spending two days on a cot in the emergency room at yet another hospital, he turned to his pastor for help.

"I was in such pain, you can't even imagine it," Divich said. "I told him, 'Listen, I don't care what it costs, get help.' "

His pastor contacted Holly Sweetin, founder of Night'nGales, a local patient advocate service. Once she showed up, Divich said, things immediately changed for the better:

"I went from being in the most egregious pain in my adult life to getting a room within 30 minutes. She demanded my charts, demanded a physician, demanded they let me hire a private physician. I can't even tell you the laws she was quoting, but she got me the help I needed."

Divich, it turned out, had five broken vertebrae . When the hospital, without even taking X-rays, was about to release him to a physical therapy facility, Sweetin insisted additional physicians be brought in to diagnose him, he said. Doctors later told him the move almost certainly would have compounded his injury.

He credits advocate Sweetin as much as anyone for his recovery: "She was a human light switch to me getting appropriate care."

Sweetin, a registered nurse with more than 20 years' experience and who still works at a local hospital, started Night'nGales a little over a year ago. The service, believed to be the first of its kind in the valley, has been hired by about 25 clients.

"We work strictly on behalf of the patients," Sweetin said. "We have the patient sign a ... release to allow us to look at their medical documentation and then we evaluate all of the information."

The advocate then uses the information to communicate with doctors, patients and relatives.

Assistance can include anything from getting a patient admitted to a hospital, as with Divich, to just letting family members know their loved one is OK.

Often, out-of-area family members can't get information because the patient is too ill to communicate and privacy restrictions limit the amount of information hospitals can provide.

In such instances, an advocate, who has access and can legally provide information, is the family's only link.

"We offer knowledge, comfort and reassurance," Sweetin said.

Sweetin first saw the need for private advocates about 10 years ago while working in an intensive care unit. She recognized that as demands on doctors and nursing shortages increased, patients suffered.

"When I started 20 years ago, staff ratios were appropriate for care and there was no need for this service," Sweetin said. "As corporate America has taken over hospitals, the amount of nurses per patient has decreased, and nurses are left with a group of patients where often the only focus they can allow is to get charting done. They do not have time to spend at the bedside."

Most hospitals offer patient relations services. (Family members can also act as advocates, but they are often guided by emotions or are not familiar with medical procedures.)

Dale McWilliams, patient relations manager at University Medical Center, said the primary focus of hospital advocates was to resolve patient-care issues.

One advantage he sees over a private advocate is that he works with the hospital staff on a regular basis and is able to develop a familiarity and rapport with them: "We know the staff and who to contact to resolve concerns."

McWilliams said patients are not charged for advocate services at UMC and each patient is advised of the service when admitted. (UMC was not the hospital where Divich was treated.)

McWilliams said both hospital and private advocates have the same goal - to ensure high-quality care for patients. He acknowledged, however, that he must also factor in concerns of the hospital and its staff.

Private advocates can focus strictly on the patients' needs without being influenced by divided loyalties.

"I think it's important to know when choosing an advocate ... where their allegiance lies," said Sarah Davis, associate director of the Center for Patient Partnerships. "Most hospital advocates do an excellent job within the scope of services that they cover, but it's fair to say they also are aware of where they get their paycheck."

The Center for Patient Partnerships, which is affiliated with the University of Wisconsin, works to create changes in consumer health care through patient advocacy and education. She even foresees a day when health insurance companies and health care providers will embrace the concept and provide such a service.

Until then, however, she expects that private advocates will become even more prevalent.

In fact, she has seen the field evolve to cover issues such as employment and financial protection. She even envisions a time when there are national standards and a certification process for advocates.

Night'nGales focuses primarily on patient care and insurance issues. In addition to a full-time insurance specialist, the group has two full-time nurses and others who assist patients. The company offers a per-visit rate (\$80) and an annual rate for patients with more long-term needs.

Sweetin said some health care providers resist her efforts, but others recognize the service's value:

"There are absolutely excellent doctors here, and I would like to work with as many of them as possible to help these people."

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