

Have a Healthcare System Problem? Hire a Patient Advocate

BY PAUL WYNN

When questions arise over medical bills, treatment options, insurance claims, undiagnosed symptoms, who do you turn to for help? Doctors, nurses, loved ones—maybe Google. Turns out there are professionals who can offer answers—and provide help.

These professionals are called patient advocates, sometimes known as health advocates or patient navigators. While the profession is in its infancy, it is slowly achieving greater recognition as more people learn about how patients can benefit from their services.

“Just as many people now have a financial advisor, personal trainer or life coach, more people are learning that they can hire a patient advocate with insider knowledge and direct experience about how the healthcare system works,” says Elisabeth Schuler Russell, founder of Patient Navigator consultancy and president of the National Association of Healthcare Advocacy Consultants (NAHAC).

Patient advocates provide a wide range of services. These services may include managing medical and hospital bills, filing insurance claims, choosing health or Medicare plans, finding the right doctor, challenging insurance denials, researching medical conditions, accompanying you or loved ones to medical appointments, among many other things.

Emerging trend

The Affordable Care Act (ACA) most recently fueled the need for “insurance navigators” to help consumers research and enroll in health insurance exchanges. The ACA has also

highlighted the dysfunction of the healthcare system and showed the growing distance between people who need healthcare and people who provide healthcare, says Vicki Breitbart, director of the health advocacy program at Sarah Lawrence College in New York. “Patient advocates can help bridge that gap.”



Navigating the healthcare system can be less confusing with a patient advocate by your side, but be prepared to pay out-of-pocket for their services.

Currently, there are an estimated 150 patient advocates in the United States, composed of nurses, physician assistants, social workers, medical billers, insurance advisors and many caregivers whose personal experience helping parents or loved ones with healthcare decisions motivated them to get involved in the profession.

Russell says that as the baby boomers age, new insurance options emerge through the ACA and treatment options become increasingly complex, there’s a growing need for patients to work with patient advocates. But skeptics warn patients that there currently is no certification or state licensure for patient advocates and no actual qualifications are required. This is not uncommon for professions

in their infancy that are still creating standards and a code of ethics, says Breitbart.

Advocacy in action

To find a health advocate, AdvoConnection.com is a good place to start. All you need to search the free directory is an email address and zip code. There are about a half

dozen advocates on the West Coast of Florida. One of them is Lea Ann Biafora with Beacon Oncology Nurse Advocates in Saint Petersburg. Biafora helps patients and their families work through multiple issues related to cancer—from evaluating medical records, questions to ask their doctors to treatment options and financial issues. “Our goal is to empower patients and help them become knowledgeable and understand their treatment options,” she says.

Paying for an advocate will most likely come out of your own pocket. Advocates’ services are generally not covered by health insurance. It’s important to find out how much an advocate charges. There’s no standard fee for patient advocates, but hourly fees range from \$60 to \$250. Some advocates will waive their fee for an initial consultation to learn more about your unique needs.

Russell recommends asking for a written agreement or contract that lists out the services to be provided, estimated hours and how long the service will take. “Most advocates will put their information and answers to you in writing without hesitation,” she explains. “Don’t rely on verbal promises or commitments.”

Finding a Patient Advocate

Hallmarks of an ethical and effective patient advocate:

Experience

Experience as a healthcare professional can be helpful in understanding the nuances of the medical system, but non-clinical backgrounds prove useful as well. Find out how much experience they have in handling similar cases.

Credentials

Some advocates may have earned local certificates from universities or online training programs, but there is no national certification or licensure for patient advocacy.

Affiliation

Does the advocate belong to professional associations such as the National Association of Healthcare Advocacy Consultants (NAHAC) or the Alliance of Professional Health Advocates (APHA)? Membership is no guarantee for ethical behavior, but these two associations have set standards for their members.

Ethics

Members of APHA and NAHAC abide by a code of ethics with the goal of providing compassion and respect to patients and their families. Other ethical conduct includes being transparent, maintaining patient privacy and avoiding discrimination.

Specialization

Word of mouth is one of the best ways to find an advocate. However, each advocate specializes in different areas so match your specific needs to someone with a track record and relevant experience.

Work Load

Ask how many projects the advocate works on. It’s normal for advocates to be juggling a few cases at one time, but make sure your needs get the attention you deserve. Check AdvoConnection.com online.

Florida Patient Advocates include:

Compass Care: 813-501-2000

Professional Advocacy: Partners: 352-326-2030

Aging Wisely: 727-477-5845

Patient Advocacy Group: 972-390-1101

Florida Patient Advocacy: 352-379-8259

Beacon Oncology Nurse Advocates: 855-490-8777

Paul Wynn has covered healthcare trends for the past 20 years as a freelance writer.