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Private patient advocates help navigate health care system

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Laurie Bouck Correspondent

Managing a health problem can be time-consuming and confusing. A patient might need multiple medications and have appointments with many different specialists. Insurance paperwork can be unclear or contain errors that need to be fixed. And other family members might live too far away to help out.

The growing field of private professional patient advocates aims to solve some of these problems. These advocates can provide a range of services, such as explaining medical conditions to patients and their caregivers, helping patients file legal paperwork and resolving insurance issues.

To highlight the work of these patient advocates, the national organization AdvoConnection is sponsoring a new Private Professional Patient Advocates Week March 13-18.

"The idea is to help individuals make more informed decisions regarding their **health care**, and to give them personal empowerment," said Alameda resident, registered nurse and private professional patient advocate Linda Garvin, who has worked as a patient advocate for 20 years.

Garvin managed her own elderly parents' medical conditions long-distance for many years, which fueled her passion for providing advocacy services for others.

She often works with people who are newly diagnosed with a disease, have chronic pain or have a chronic health problem.

Although hospitals and insurance companies often provide patient advocacy services, they have allegiance to their employers as well as patients, said Garvin.

"With the private patient advocate, our whole focus is just on that individual," she said, "and we are there to benefit and advocate just for that individual. We're not paid by anybody but the person who is hiring us."

Garvin often steps in when someone feels overwhelmed by a **health care** problem or diagnosis, such as a stroke.

"I can provide resources for the individual," she said, such as helping someone choose a skilled nursing facility for a spouse

or making sure the home environment is safe for the patient. Garvin also helps patients obtain second opinions, discusses alternative treatments and attends medical appointments with patients.

Private professional patient advocates cost about \$125 to \$200 per hour. These fees are usually not covered by health insurance, although some employers cover them.

There is no state or national licensing process for private professional patient advocates.

Training programs for advocates, however, are offered through organizations and educational institutions.

As a result, advocates' backgrounds can vary. Some advocates have worked as **health care** providers, but others have not, and different advocates offer different services.

To find an advocate or learn more about what they do, go to Advocate Connection (), or the National Association of Healthcare Advocacy Consultants ().

To learn more about Garvin, go to her website at www.patientadvocatebayarea.com. She is also available via e-mail (at info@patientadvocatebayarea) or telephone (at 510-520-0186).



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