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Tackling the social causes of health problems

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Partnership pairs medical and legal fields to help those in need

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What do you get when you put a doctor and a lawyer on the same medical case?

When they team up in a medical-legal partnership, such as the Community Advocacy Program, a partnership between The MetroHealth System and The Legal Aid Society of Cleveland, you get "more effective health outcomes for the patient-client," said Legal Aid staff attorney Katie Feldman, who has been on the partnership team since last year and with Legal Aid for four years.

In a partnership of this kind, the doctor identifies the socioeconomic factors that negatively impact a patient's health, such as roach-infested housing, poor nutrition, or perhaps the glacial pace at which a school moves to transfer a child with severe behavior problems into a special education program.

The lawyer provides legal representation and remedies that enable the patient to more fully benefit from care, medications and treatment. For example, the attorney might write letters to landlords, putting them on notice about their roach-infested properties; help secure appropriate documents for food stamps; or make calls to school administrators about the legal consequences of ignoring a mother's letters to have her child assessed for special education programs.

Getting results

In 2008, when Charlotte Cohen's (names of clients have been changed) son Adam was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) and learning disorders, his psychiatrist prescribed medications for his conditions and suggested Cohen send a letter to his school requesting an educational assessment so that an individual education plan (IEP) could be created for him.

"I sent several letters," said Cohen. "Nothing happened."

When Dr. Florence Kimbo took over Adam's care in the fall of 2010, she immediately told Cohen to contact Feldman at the Legal Aid Society. Kimbo had learned about the medical-legal



Legal Aid attorney Katie Feldman works with MetroHealth patients whose health problems create special educational needs.

partnership during her residency, but by law she couldn't be the one to initiate contact with a lawyer. "It had to be the mother," she said.

Cohen and Feldman met for the first time in January in Feldman's MetroHealth office. Within six weeks, Adam's school assessment was done, and an IEP was in place. Feldman "was able to address the things that I couldn't or didn't know how to," Cohen said. Her son Adam "didn't just get special help with his reading and math, he started seeing a counselor at school, too."

He also became more willing to take his medications, Kimbo said.

"It's not just Adam (who is) doing better," said Cohen. "I'm less stressed and worried, too."

Feldman, who returned to Cleveland in 2007 to be with family, focuses on the education-related needs of the patients with whom she works, she said. The lawyers in the partnership provide an array of legal services, however, including:

- Resolving housing problems and insurance disputes
- Securing local, state and federal benefits
- Preparing and notarizing documents
- Addressing credit problems
- Negotiating workplace accommodations
- Referring clients to social service agencies that provide psychosocial support and counseling

Besides Feldman, there are two other lawyers in the MetroHealth-Legal Aid partnership. While all three work with and get referrals from MetroHealth doctors, nurses and social workers, they always represent the client, not the facility. "When their patients come to us for help with legal issues, they become our clients," said Feldman. "And there's a lot of client confidentiality in what we do."

Teaching the law

While the MetroHealth-Legal Aid Society partnership was "born" in pediatrics – and today 30% of all clients are children – the number of seniors, immigrants and formerly incarcerated people served through the program is growing. As more funding becomes available, Legal Aid hopes to expand the program into other "populations," said Legal Aid spokesperson Melanie Shakarian.

In addition to providing direct services to clients, the program's lawyers do on-site workshops to help healthcare providers recognize medical problems that can be solved legally. They also provide form letters that can be used to prod slow-moving bureaucrats, landlords or school systems into action.

While medical-legal partnerships are focused on helping low-income patients solve healthcare problems, their numbers wouldn't be growing at the rate they are – currently there are partnerships in more than 230 U.S. hospitals and health centers – if they weren't also providing financial benefits.

"The clients we work with aren't just getting free legal services," said Feldman. "The healthcare providers we work with tell us (our patient-clients) are getting sustainable solutions to their health problems, too, so they aren't going to the emergency department ... (and they are) enrolling in benefits programs that improve their nutrition. And the kids I work with are getting another partner in their treatment, too."

An idea worth fighting for

The first medical-legal partnership was set up in Boston in 1993 by Dr. Barry Zuckerman, then head of Boston Medical Center's department of pediatrics and currently chair of the department of pediatrics at Boston University School of Medicine. Frustrated by the non-medical issues – poverty, parents' inability to navigate the healthcare system – that exacerbated his tiny patients' problems, he brought in a lawyer to help parents get the state and federal benefits, services and financial aid for which they were eligible.

In 2005, he and attorney Ellen M. Lawton spearheaded creation of the National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership. Visit www.medical-legalpartnership.org.

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