How Medical Directors Survive In a Tough Job Market

By MargaretAnn Cross  
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Once Abbie Leibowitz, MD knew he would be leaving his post as chief medical officer at Aetna, he began brainstorming new business ideas with former colleagues at weekly coffee meetings. The former medical director eventually became an entrepreneur, helping to launch a company that fills gaps in the health care system. Leibowitz’s company, Health Advocate links nurse advisors with individuals who need help finding health care resources and understanding their benefits.

Abbie Leibowitz, MD  
Chief medical officer, Health Advocate

“In the beginning, there weren’t a lot of rules,” says Abbie Leibowitz, MD of his early 1970s involvement with the fledgling HMO of Pennsylvania, which became US Healthcare and later merged with Aetna. A new pediatrician then, Leibowitz helped define physicians’ involvement in managed care as he joined the HMO’s committees and got to know its management. He took a part-time medical director position in 1984 and left practice in 1987 to become a full-time medical director.

US Healthcare promoted Leibowitz to chief medical officer, and he accepted the same post when the company merged with Aetna. In 2000, as Aetna reorganized, Leibowitz left. At first, he followed a passion for electronic medical records and accepted a business development position with Medscape, an internet-based healthcare information company. When the company faltered, he helped divide and sell its assets.

Maintaining an entrepreneurial spirit, Leibowitz helped launch Health Advocate in late 2001. The West Conshohocken, Pa based company serves as a resource in the same way a health care practitioner often helps friends and relatives navigate the health care system, Leibowitz says. So far, 140 clients – including large and small employers, unions, and government agencies – offer Health Advocate’s services to consumers. The company assists clients with clinical care issues as well as billing problems, and the nurses who answer phones are backed up by medical directors.

As chief medical officer at Aetna, Abbie Leibowitz, MD oversaw the work of 350 medical directors. Aetna currently employs only 102.

“There will always be the opportunity for clinically experienced physicians to contribute strongly to the world of patient care outside of the traditional practice environment,” Leibowitz says.