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Firms go to bat with insurers

Medical consumers get help dealing with paperwork, finding resources

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When Eileen Gilbert's husband Tom was diagnosed with throat cancer, she was engulfed in a sea of worry — and a mountain of paperwork.

"Until you're faced with a situation like this, you have no idea how time-consuming it is to wade through it," said Gilbert, who works at Samaritan Hospice in Marlton. "You're on hold with the insurance company when you're supposed to be working — and then you wind up going around in circles."

Gilbert handed that burden to someone else when her employer subscribed to Health Advocate, a suburban Philadelphia service that helps resolve insurance claims, as well as coordinate appointments with specialists and identify resources for elder care.

"The minute I turned it over to them, a huge weight lifted from my shoulders," she recalled.

As employees are increasingly asked to manage their own benefits or resolve problems online, companies that specialize in negotiating the health-care system are growing. The Philadelphia-area Health Advocate, California-based Care Counsel and Patient Care headquartered in New Orleans are at the forefront of the industry.

The nonprofit Patient Advocate Foundation, based in Newport News, Va., also provides advice to individuals on navigating the health claims maze.

Increasingly, solo health-claims advisers are touting their own, fee-based services, filling the gaps not covered by employer-provided companies.

Cases at Health Advocate in Blue Bell, Pa., are managed by registered nurses, who research problems and advocate for patients.

"Health care is difficult to navigate and the consumer is being driven nuts," said Abbie Leibowitz, chief medical officer. "It's

silly to think that people can just go online and solve benefits problems."

While half of all calls concern claims, Health Advocate also identifies resources outside the system. When an elderly wife asked for help in negotiating an estimated \$30,000 per year bill for nursing care for her husband after a stroke, the service put together a plan that combined town-sponsored transportation, adult day care and a senior program at the local YMCA. The cost: \$110 per week.

Gilbert, who lives in Riverton, said the plan also eliminates much of the stress and frustration people face in dealing with illness.

"A helpful, live person answers the phone," she said. "And she never puts you on hold."

The Chamber of Commerce Southern New Jersey, sponsors the distribution of Health Advocate to its member businesses, 85 percent of which employ 50 or fewer employees.

Chamber president Debra Di Lorenzo called on the plan to cut through the red tape when she sought treatment for chronic headaches.

"The best I could do on my own was to schedule an appointment that was nine months away," she recalled. "I contacted Health Advocate on a Thursday and within 24 hours they were able to get me an appointment for the following Tuesday with a top-notch specialist"

Founded in 2002 by Leibowitz and four other former executives from Aetna Insurance and U.S. Healthcare, Health Advocate started off charging on an hourly basis, a model that was an immediate flop.

But when the company switched to a monthly fee per employee, the business took off, picking up large businesses including Home Depot, Lowe's Home Improvement Warehouse, Wawa Markets and Subaru of North America. The Glassboro Board of Education is a recent subscriber.

Currently, Health Advocate provides benefits for 540 companies and organizations, covering 1.75 million people. This summer, the company showed its first profit Leibowitz said.

Health Advocate charges between \$1.50 and \$3.95 per month for each covered employee, depending on the size of the company. The fee covers the worker, plus his or her spouse, children, parents and in-laws.

"There are a lot of people in the sandwich generation (those caring for both children and parents) who have to take time from their work to help their parents," said spokeswoman Carol Fischer. "We take care of both generations."

At Mitsubishi Fuso Truck in Logan Township, adding Health Advocate helped to free the distributor's two-person human resources department from the constant demands of dealing with the insurance concerns of 80 employees, said Carol R. Chiaro, HR director.

She said the benefit also increases employee productivity because workers no longer have to pursue their own claims or coordinate treatment plans.

"Plus the employee doesn't have to make the call," Chiaro said. "The mom can call; the mom-in-law can call."

Fischer said the trend toward outsourcing benefits services has been fueled by the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act which has left many companies confused as to how to resolve employee issues without compromising privacy.

Chiaro said Health Advocate also was a low-cost way for Mitsubishi Fuso to upgrade its benefits and boost morale.

"We have a very nice package and this service really enhances it," she said.

As for the Gilberts, they were delighted to learn they owed only a few hundred dollars out of the tens of thousands of dollars in medical bills they received.

"Now we can focus on Tom getting well without all the stress of that paperwork," Gilbert said. "That's what is really important."