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choices by educating them about the patient's medical conditions,

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By Teri Dreher, RN, CMM.

“Everyone today needs a patient advocate.” That’s what the American Heart Association said. Indeed, with our increasingly complicated healthcare system, more and more of your clients are finding that what the American Heart Association said is true, and they are increasingly turning to patient advocates to manage their care or

the care of their loved ones. You may some day come across a client you feel can

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It's important to remember, though, that not all patient advocates are created equal. Some may not have any hands-on healthcare experience beyond their advocacy training. To find someone with more expertise, it's best to look for an RN patient advocate. These advocates are often veteran Registered Nurses with experience in patient care. National certification and graduate training in the field can also signal someone who is more knowledgeable about advocating for patients. About 20 U.S. universities offer graduate certificate programs in private patient advocacy. National certification became available this year via the Patient Advocate Certification Board™, which conducts a rigorous exam spanning a broad spectrum of patient advocacy areas. Those who pass earn the credentials "BCPA"—Board Certified Patient Advocate.

Rather than a hindrance to doctors, patient advocates are often seen as a time-saver. A physician can communicate information to a patient advocate in five minutes that might take him or her 20 minutes to communicate to a patient. That's a plus to both sides. It saves time for the doctor and leaves the patient more time to understand what is going on and get a clear understanding of their options from an unbiased source. A patient advocate will give a patient the whole picture, not just the one that is the most financially beneficial to an insurance company or will put the most money in an unscrupulous physician's pocket.

A patient advocate can also provide follow-up to help with a patient's care. Anyone who has ever listened to a physician's instructions in their office only to forget the details of those instructions when they get home or who is trying to manage a family member's care from out-of-state understands the importance of this. The patient advocate can provide instruction when necessary, monitor compliance and watch for side effects of new medications. And when they are monitoring patients in their homes, they can often catch the early signs of trouble and get them medical help before the health issue escalates to a health crisis.

So can a patient act as their own advocate? Absolutely! But trained patient advocates

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Teri Dreher, RN, is an award-winning patient advocate and a pioneer in the growing field of private patient advocacy. A critical care nurse for more than 30 years, today she is owner/founder of NShore Patient Advocates. She is the author of How to Be a Healthcare Advocate for Yourself & Your Loved Ones. www.Northshorern.com

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