

Kids' Lawyer Puts Out Shingle – At The Hospital

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The child came to the hospital to see a doctor to treat muscular dystrophy. It turned out the child needed to see a lawyer too—and found one without leaving the building.

That was able to happen because of a new in-house law office at Yale-New Haven Hospital dedicated solely to remedying poverty-related legal problems for pediatric patients—problems that can sometimes contribute to medical problems as well.

Young patients returning home from the hospital sometimes return to a house without electricity. An apartment with black mold or vermin. A fridge without food. Such conditions can make staying healthy difficult, even if patients adhere to doctors' regimens.

Since the law office – called a medical legal partnership – opened in June, Yale-New Haven has sought to tackle both kinds of problems in tandem.

Attorney Alice Rosenthal (pictured right) leads the two-room office at the hospital's Pediatric Primary Care Center. Raised in New Haven, Rosenthal has dedicated her career to working on education and child-welfare law.



The medical-legal partnership is the hospital's first foray into providing legal services for its patients. Yale-New Haven runs the office in conjunction with the Center for Children's Advocacy, a Connecticut based not-for-profit.



Rosenthal addresses poverty-related issues that fall under the headings of housing, utilities, education, and benefits like public assistance and food stamps. These problems can affect a child's health and reduce the effectiveness of medical care, she said. Poor housing conditions like black mold and rodents, for example, may aggravate conditions like chronic asthma. Asthmatics who live in such an environment may find themselves in the emergency room time and time again. If landlords refuse to fix the health hazards in patients' homes, Rosenthal said, she can step in to ensure the issues are remedied.

So far, Rosenthal has also secured disability benefits and a wheelchair for a child with muscular dystrophy and ensured a boy with severe autism receives the educational and behavioral support he needs at school.

Sometimes, helping patients requires representing them in court. Other times, a brief consultation is all that is needed. If Rosenthal receives a non-poverty-related legal issue, like guardianship, paternity, or divorce cases, she can connect patients to other legal services.

The partnership has helped roughly 20 patients so far, Rosenthal said.

In addition to taking on cases for individual clients, the office educates medical staff on the ways a lawyer can help their patients. The office also plans to address systemic issues at the local or state level should they arise.

Nine Years In The Making

The new medical-legal partnership has been nine years in the making, pediatrician Ada Fenick said. Fenick is the partnership's medical site director and the acting director of the Yale-New Haven Children's Hospital Pediatric Primary Care Center.

A Yale law student approached Fenick with the idea back around 2004. After that, she worked to secure the necessary funding and to find a legal partner for the office. Yale-New Haven has agreed to fund the partnership for its first three years while the program seeks other sources of support.



According to the National Center for Medical-Legal Partnership, 282 such partnerships exist in hospitals and health centers across the United States. The first partnership opened at the Boston Medical Center in 1993; the concept has gradually spread nationwide. The Center for Children's Advocacy is involved in four other medical-legal partnerships in Connecticut.

”[The partnership] is an investment in future health,” Fenick said. Social and economic issues, she said, can have long-term health implications. If children don't learn how to read properly, how will they read medical labels in the future?

“The more we can get children healthy now,” Rosenthal said, the better their long-term health outcomes.

In the past, Yale-New Haven doctors didn't ask much about a child's living situation, Fenick said. “Doctors like to have answers,” she said, “and if we don't have an answer, we don't like to ask those questions.” Now that Rosenthal and the medical-legal partnership have come to the hospital, doctors are training residents how to inquire into a patient's home environment in a sensitive way.

Though Yale-New Haven has long had social workers – and social workers work alongside Rosenthal – the hospital can now provide “more holistic services” to its pediatric patients, Rosenthal said. Rosenthal said she feels it's important to be visible to both families and staff. She plans to add office hours during which patients can stop by to talk.

“[Rosenthal's] here rather than at some distant place,” Fenick said. When a legal concern arises, doctors can walk families directly to her office. “Giving someone a phone number is not quite the same.”

In the future, Rosenthal and Fenick said, they hope the partnership will grow to include other attorneys – currently, Rosenthal is the only one – and to serve adults as well as kids.

http://www.newhavenindependent.org/index.php/archives/entry/medical-legal_partnership_come/#cmt