

# Vicki → Bryan (I suspect you may have seen this in Sunday's Post)

# Helping You Through The Medical Maze

As the health-care system grows more complicated, many people need help handling it. So a new specialty has emerged—that of the Patient Navigator (PN). The role may involve coordinating doctors' visits, maintaining telephone contact between patients and physicians, arranging rides to and from the hospital, helping with insurance forms, and even suggesting what to ask at your next appointment.

PNs can be former nurses, social workers, or community health workers. "There is no set requirement," says Dr. Peter C. Raich, chief of hematology/oncology at the Denver Health Medical Center, which trains patient navigators. The role was created primarily to assist the poor, uninsured, and those with low literacy levels. But PNs can help "anyone who finds the health-care system confusing and difficult to use, poor and rich alike," notes Dr. Kevin Fiscella of the University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry in upstate New York.

That especially applies to patients who are coping with conditions that require complex testing and treatment, such as diabetes, HIV, or cancer. Indeed, the National Cancer Institute (NCI), one of several organizations that have trained at least

300 PNs across the country, is funding a number of research projects to study the impact of patient navigators on underserved populations, such as ethnic minorities. These groups do not always get timely, appropriate advice and care when confronted with a cancer diagnosis. Early indications suggest that the programs "improve the lives of patients, especially those among the socially disadvantaged," says Dr. Sanya Springfield, director of the NCI Center to Reduce Cancer Health Disparities.

To find a patient navigator program in your area, call your hospital's patient-relations department or contact your local chapter of the American Cancer Society. Remember, you don't have to go it alone.



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