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HEALTH CARE QUARTERLY

Nurses taking 'road less traveled' as medical consultants to lawyers

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The rise in medical-related law suits is prompting many nurses in all practice areas to head down a different career path — legal nurse consulting.

Legal nurse consulting gives nurses the opportunity to apply their nursing and clinical knowledge to legal cases involving medical malpractice and health-related issues, says Vickie L. Milazzo, founder of Medical-Legal Consulting Institute Inc. in Houston (<http://www.LegalNurse.com>). Milazzo is a registered nurse with both a master's degree in nursing and a law degree.

"I don't feel I've lost any of my nursing knowledge. I've gained more than I ever could have in a hospital setting," says legal nurse consultant Jennifer Fougerousse of League City, who formerly worked as a surgical nurse at St. John's Hospital in Nassau Bay. Almost two years ago, she "eased into" legal nurse consulting and founded Lighthouse Med-Law.

Legal nurse consultants work with attorneys on areas such as defining standards of care, reviewing and summarizing medical records and analyzing testimony. Currently, the largest practice areas for legal nurse consultants are medical malpractice and



PHOTO COURTESY OF MEDICAL-LEGAL CONSULTING INSTITUTE INC.

Vickie L. Milazzo of Medical-Legal Consulting Institute Inc. teaches a course for legal nurse consultants.

personal injury (both plaintiff and defense), according to Milazzo.

"I can work plaintiff or defense, and I'm looking for the same things," Fougerousse says. "I'm not there to make the case. I'm there to help the attorneys. If there's something there, I'm going to tell them, and if there's nothing there, I'm going to tell them, too. Having the background I have, I can tell them, 'This is what happened'

and add my comments as to whether something is questionable or can be researched more. And I can research."

One of the big advantages of legal nursing is an improvement in working conditions, according to Milazzo.

"The field allows nurses to work in a professional legal environment with more flexible hours than the traditional shift work often associated with nursing," she says.

According to a recent survey, 48 percent of legal nurse consultants are in independent practice, and many of the consultants are able to work from their homes.

"My goal was not to make a ton of money. It was to be able to stay active in my field and still have flexibility. I didn't want anybody else rearing my daughter,"

Fougerousse says.

However, another advantage of legal nursing is higher pay.

"With fees ranging from \$60 to \$150 an hour, legal nurse consulting is more lucrative than the typical nursing job," Milazzo notes.

Fougerousse says she is now making more money working part-time as a legal nurse consultant than she did working part-time at the hospital.

Legal nurse consulting also offers an option to nurses who are no longer able to practice traditional nursing.

Another legal nurse consultant, Denise Heath-Graham, says she greatly enjoyed her career as a trauma nurse, but became unable to practice due to a back injury. Her training as a certified legal nurse consultant allowed her to channel her knowledge and expertise into a positive outlet, and she now has her own legal nurse consulting business.

“The training positioned me for success and provided the encouragement and support I needed to actually get out there and do it,”

Fougerousse says she considers the training in legal terminology and understanding “the attorney’s viewpoint” to be among the most valuable parts of the home-study course she took, which provides information ranging from how to analyze cases and write reports to how to

market consulting services and set up a home office.

She started working with two attorneys, who she had consulted about the need for legal nursing services before taking the

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course, and gradually reduced her nursing schedule. Now, in order to continue working only part-time, she is subcontracting work to another nurse, who recently completed the course and plans eventually to become an associate.

Milazzo is considered a pioneer of legal nurse consulting. She worked as a critical care nurse in Houston for six years before becoming a legal nurse consultant.

She began training legal nurse consultants in 1985 and later founded Medical-Legal Consulting Institute Inc., which now has provided training for more than 20,000 legal nurse consultants — more than 2,000 of those trained last year alone. Her program was featured recently in a *New York Times* “Money and Business” article on this career option for nurses.

Those receiving training and fulfilling other requirements for education and experience qualify for the certified legal nurse consultant (CLNC) designation, established in 1994, which is administered by the Medical-Legal Consulting Institute Inc. and is the official certification of the National Alliance of Certified Legal Nurse Consultants.

The certification assists legal nurse consultants in distinguishing their role as professional consultants from those of lower-paid legal assistants, such as paralegals, and promotes and maintains quality, Milazzo says.

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