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## Partnership helps patients

Lawyers, Wishard doctors work together.

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When a child and his siblings keep returning to the hospital or health clinic for the same reasons, it may raise a red flag or two for the doctor, but she may not know exactly which questions to ask or what to do with the information she gathers from the patient's parent. For instance, a child with asthma may receive needed treatment from the doctor and then go home to an unhealthy environment that includes mold, mice, and cockroaches, only to get sick again shortly after, which requires another doctor visit. This cycle may repeat several times before anything changes in the child's environment and health, at least without some kind of legal intervention. This is one example of the type of case that the medical-legal **partnership** between Wishard Memorial Hospital in Indianapolis and the "legal back office" of attorneys from the Neighborhood Christian Legal Clinic, Indianapolis Legal Aid Society, Indiana Legal Services, and Baker & Daniels have faced since early 2008 when the **partnership** started taking on patients' legal issues.

With legal intervention, attorneys can confront and even threaten a lawsuit or fight negligent landlords in court - something many Wishard patients may not know how to do or simply can't afford.

In one case, multiple patients lived on the same block and reported the same health and environmental problems, said Chad Priest of Baker & Daniels, one of the founders of the **partnership**.

It turned out that all of the families had the same landlord, a case John Floreancig of Indianapolis Legal Aid Society said was assigned to his organization.

In fact, the Marion County Health Department declared a house discovered by the **partnership** was the worst case of mold they had ever seen, said Jessica Barth, chief counsel for the legal department of Wishard Health Services.

Other than landlord-tenant cases, the **partnership** also has assisted patients with immigration matters, domestic violence, guardianship, family law, and benefits issues. When legal issues arise such as bankruptcy or consumer credit, the legal **partnership** will refer the patients to legal organizations who can help.

Josh Abel, managing attorney of the Neighborhood Christian Legal Clinic, said NCLC is currently working on a client's asylum case, where the client claims his child wouldn't receive the same medical care in their home country. That case is pending.

Floreancig and Abel each recalled landlord-tenant cases that were resolved by visits to the landlords that resulted in mold cleanup and regular extermination schedules for mice and cockroaches.

There is also a process to determine if the patients' environmental problems are the fault of the landlord or of their own doing, which may be cause for introducing some kind of mental health assistance, Abel said.

Dr. Dawn Haut, a pediatrician based in Pecar Health Center, which is part of Wishard Health Services, said the **partnership** has been "transformative" to the way she runs her practice.

"Doctors don't often think about these things," she said. "It has changed how I take medical histories, and after just a couple months I found myself asking questions in a new and different way."

Haut said 15 years ago, when she was first starting her pediatric practice, she would ask patients if they had a gun in the home as part of the screening process. Her patients would almost always answer "no" to the question, but when she got her first "yes," she didn't know what to do with the information.

She compared the medical-legal **partnership** to that experience, only now when she receives troubling answers that may deserve additional help, she can call someone who can actually do something about it and she will find out what happened with her patient's case.

Before the **partnership** she could refer patients to legal organizations, but she never knew what happened next unless the patient told her.

"I can't imagine not having this resource," she said.

Priest said that the **partnership** not only helps individual patients but has the potential to transform the communities where patients live.

In 2008, the **partnership** helped 85 people. For 2009, one of the goals of the attorneys and doctors is to retool the system to see what works and what can be improved to continue to help as many people as possible not only get well through medical care, but to get them legal assistance when needed.

While the Indianapolis-based medicallegal **partnership** is still in its early stages, Priest said there is interest in other parts of the state. Priest and Baker & Daniels' pro bono coordinator Brita Horvath spoke with pro bono district plan administrators in late 2008, which gave the coordinators a new appreciation for the idea if they already heard about it.

Beverly Corn, plan administrator of Pro Bono District 13, which includes Daviess, Dubois, Gibson, Knox, Martin, Perry, Pike, Posey, Spencer, Vanderburgh, and Warrick counties, suggested Priest and Horvath talk to the administrators after meeting with them a couple times.

She had already told her fellow plan administrators about the concept, and after they heard from Priest and Horvath, she said, "They told me, 'Oh, now I get it. Now I understand why you think this is such a good idea.'"

Corn said she has met with an entity in Posey County, but it will take time. For now, she said, the possibility of a **partnership** is still in the discussion phase, and she hopes to get something going by the end of 2009.

"I think it's an incredible collaboration between two entities - the medical profession and the legal profession," she said. "When you look at the people involved, they are the only ones who can do that work. ... Doctors and nurses are the only ones who can do medical work, and lawyers are the only ones who can do the legal work."

As a pro bono district plan coordinator who is often looking for interesting cases for volunteer attorneys in her district, she added, "It's also a great opportunity for volunteering and doing something really good without getting into a case that's going to hang on for 18 years."

Corn said she believes the philosophy that "everything we do is holistic in nature, and I think this is a good opportunity to prove that and put that into practice."

She's also mentioned to the Crisis Intervention Team in Evansville that she would like to help with any legal issues that arise while police are dealing with people who have mental illnesses.

"It's a little like a medical-legal **partnership** but not quite," she said, adding it's just one of a few things going on in southern Indiana where the legal community could help the community at large.

Priest mentioned he also knew of some interest from the Fort Wayne area's pro bono district, and also where Baker & Daniels has an office, but that is in the early stages.

For anyone who is interested in starting another medical-legal **partnership** in Indiana, Priest said they could call him at (317) 237-1349 as he would be happy to see similar **partnerships** develop all over the state.