When I entered nursing school 13 years ago, I was an adult student making a career change. In my previous career, I had obtained a bachelor's degree in law enforcement and spent 5 years working for various criminal justice agencies. While in nursing school, I found myself immediately drawn to the legal aspects of health care delivery and began to look for a way to combine my skills and education. For the past 8 years, I have been able to do exactly that by working as a legal nurse consultant (LNC), an area of nursing practice that perfectly suits my interests and experience in both law and health care. The term legal nurse consultant refers to registered nurses whose knowledge of health care information is used by legal, medical, and corporate professionals to assist them with cases that involve injuries to persons. An LNC organizes, interprets, and researches vast amounts of both medical and legal data for use by these professionals to resolve their cases. Educating these colleagues on specific medical aspects of their cases is also a large part of the job. LNCs have been employed in this manner for at least 10 to 15 years, but it has just been in the past 5 to 6 years that this specialty has become its own career track.

As I mentioned, I became an LNC by a rather circuitous route. After completing my degree in law enforcement, I spent 5 years working for criminal justice agencies in my hometown of Evansville, Indiana. My experience in probation and prosecutor's offices, as well as police agencies, gave me a solid legal background and a sharp set of "people skills" that would later be very valuable in my nursing career, particularly in the emergency department. Wanting more career flexibility and upward mobility, I returned to school and received an associate degree in nursing. As a nurse, I was often approached by attorneys I had known from my days in law enforcement. These attorneys asked me to interpret medical records for their legal cases. I immediately recognized an opportunity for a new career. During the next few years, I obtained a paralegal certificate, a bachelor of science degree in nursing, certifications in both critical care and emergency nursing, and pursued any educational opportunities available to improve my skills as an LNC. During this time I did occasional reviews for attorneys and worked as an emergency nurse in both community and teaching hospitals. I found that attorneys were particularly interested in my ED experiences, because many of their cases involved motor vehicle accidents and on-the-job injuries frequently treated in an emergency department.

Attorneys have traditionally used physicians to review medical records and educate them on medical issues. However, physicians often do not have the time to review entire volumes of records or, if they do take the time, cost the attorney two to three times what an LNC would customarily charge. Attorneys have found that nurses will take the time to do a total review of the records and create a more detailed report in a more cost-efficient manner than a physician. The registered nurse's experience as a patient educator also enables the nurse to explain complex medical terminology, procedures, and disease processes on a level attorneys can understand. Increasing numbers of attorneys employ nurses to assist them with interviewing their clients, reviewing their prospective cases, and educating them on medical topics before they initiate a lawsuit, as well as assisting them throughout the entire litigation process. Emergency nurses who become LNCs are particularly effective in the client contact role. The questioning skills are similar to those used in the triage setting.

One of my biggest challenges as an LNC has been the educational aspect of the role. Although it is much like patient teaching in the clinical setting, I must always substantiate my findings with reports...
Attorneys have found that nurses will take the time to do a total review of the records and create a more detailed report in a more cost-efficient manner than a physician.
of an economics expert to assign an appropriate value to his case.

I have found that I constantly use certain skills acquired in my 9 years of emergency nursing everyday in my role as an LNC. My knowledge of hospital procedures and customary patient flow patterns, both in academic and community-based institutions, has trained me to ask appropriate questions about the sequence of events in a case that someone without such knowledge would not know to ask. As previously mentioned, an LNC with an ED background has experience in several specialty areas that are often seen in medicolegal cases, such as obstetrics, orthopedics, cardiology, surgery, and trauma. Workers’ compensation and personal injury cases tend to involve orthopedics and trauma, whereas medical malpractice cases are often related to surgery, cardiology, or obstetrics.

Just as there are a wide variety of subspecialty opportunities in clinical nursing, there are also a large number of subspecialties in legal nurse consulting. LNCs may be nurses who work in the following areas: law firms, risk management departments, insurance companies, state boards of nursing licensure, government regulatory agencies, or as independent consultants to attorneys on a case-by-case basis. As nurses continue to gain positions in these areas, legal nurse consulting will gain increased recognition as a viable and exciting career pathway for nurses. The more employers use the expertise of LNCs, the more they realize that the LNC is an efficient, cost-effective partner in the investigation of their cases. I have often found things in cases that even the most experienced attorney might overlook.

Legal nurse consulting provides an exciting and challenging career combining nursing and the law—one that I highly recommend.

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