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## Firms give health advice for a price

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By Linda K. Wertheimer, Globe Staff | June 23, 2008

You do not have to be famous or well connected like Senator Edward M. Kennedy to get speedy access to the best minds in medicine. Being affluent, though, can help.

During the last six years, a number of personal health advising firms and solo consultants have opened shop, catering to people willing to pay fees ranging from \$150 an hour to \$100,000 a year for advice on the best doctors and treatments for their maladies.

The advisers offer the type of service Kennedy recently sought from a physician friend, who investigated experimental treatments and spoke with leading cancer specialists after the senator was diagnosed with a brain tumor. The commercial services promise to assist customers whether they need cutting-edge treatment for cancer, emergency care for a broken bone, or help obtaining a vaccine in short supply.

"All I need to do is make one phone call," said Steven G. Hoch, a client of PinnacleCare, a Baltimore health advising firm. "They pave the way for you."

Hoch, 54, a founding partner of a wealth management firm, said he would rather not bother his primary care doctor at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center with routine health questions that could be posed quickly to his personal health adviser. "Is this a bit of a luxury? Probably," he said. "I see it as being an investment in our family's health."

Private health consultants are trying to fill a gap in healthcare created by overworked primary care doctors who have less time to coordinate patient care, while also catering to the desire of a growing number of patients to take charge of their healthcare. Consultants, many of whom are registered nurses, social workers, or physicians, help clients find specialists and also will make calls to ensure that a patient's various doctors are communicating with each other.

"This allows people who have a lot of money to spend it on obtaining some mixture of better care and reassurance," said Alan Sager, a professor at Boston University's School of Public Health. "What's hard to tell: Is it better care?"

PinnacleCare, founded in 2002, seeks the wealthy as clients. Its fees range from \$7,000 to \$100,000 a year, excluding an initial sign-up fee. The standard family membership is \$10,000.

Roughly four years ago, Hoch bought a family membership. Hoch, his wife, and their three adult children receive 24/7 access to medical advice from PinnacleCare via e-mail and phone and can meet face to face with their personal health adviser, who is based in New York and has a master's degree in health advocacy. They use the service for preventive care as well as for assistance during emergencies and foreign travel.

PinnacleCare prepared a "medical intelligence" report for the family to use if it needs healthcare during an upcoming vacation to Tanzania, and their health adviser helped them get the yellow fever vaccine during a temporary shortage.

PinnacleCare serves 3,600 members across the country and abroad, including the families of 20 billionaires, said Dr. Miles Varn, a former emergency room physician and the company's chief medical officer.

"We consider ourselves a health advisory service much in the same way people have health managers and financial planners," he said.

Other consultants see themselves as performing more of a neighborly service for clients, who tend to be more middle- than high-income and need immediate help with a health dilemma.

Joanna Smith, a psychotherapist who has helped with discharge planning at hospitals, created Healthcare Liaison about three years ago. Based in Berkeley, Calif., she charges \$150 an hour to 75 to 100 clients a year.

"It's about everybody being overwhelmed by healthcare," said Smith, who is training medical professionals to follow her lead in California, Colorado, and Washington State. She guides clients to what they need, whether it is a physical therapist to come to their nursing home or a specialist for a rare disease.

Smith is working with a Philadelphia-based advocate to create an Association of Private Healthcare Advocates for the unregulated field.

Dr. Howard L. Kramer, who practiced medicine for 20 years, hopes to become a part of the movement. The North Andover resident is starting Kramer Clinical Consulting and plans to charge \$300 for an initial two-hour consultation and \$150 an hour for subsequent services.

Kramer left his primary care practice at Beth Israel Deaconess in 1999. "I was getting frustrated with the pressures to move quicker and quicker and spend less time with each patient," he said.

As a consultant, he said, he will offer clients a personal touch as a navigator through the healthcare system and "will try to teach them what the meaning of their diagnosis is."

Some executives at area hospitals said they prefer to work from within to relieve the burden on primary care doctors.

"We need to address our concerns at improving the access to primary care physicians," said Dr. Andy Whittemore, chief medical officer at Brigham and Women's Hospital. "To me, that makes a lot more sense than all of these individual advocacy units popping up."

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