

# Nurses Find Niche As Legal Consultants

Specialized knowledge of medical practices pays off in med-mal lawsuits

By DOUGLAS S. MALAN

Julie Dickinson went to the Hartford law firm of Fontaine, Alissi & Knapp two years ago to answer a job posting for a paralegal. But she had bigger ideas in mind.

Dickinson, who had worked for several years as a registered nurse, was interested in bringing a nurse's perspective to the Hartford firm, which defends professionals and hospitals in medical and dental malpractice cases.

She was pitching the firm to create a position for a legal nurse consultant whose ability

it was difficult for someone not trained in record-keeping to assemble complete medical records and timelines of treatments," said Craig Fontaine, a name partner of Fontaine, Alissi & Knapp. Dickinson's legal nurse consultant position "has become a useful backbone to preparing the defense of a case."

Fontaine said Dickinson's knowledge of how hospitals work and what medical information is most important for a particular case is extremely helpful to attorneys who don't have such specialized knowledge. "We have found [the use of a legal nurse consultant] to be worth its weight in gold," Fontaine said.

The new Connecticut chapter has 16 members.

Legal nurse consultants have clinical experience treating patients, and they're hired by plaintiff and defense law firms, insurance companies and hospitals to analyze a variety of issues in the medical arena that become important during litigation. These include medical treatments and their outcomes and standards of care and nursing practices.

In the Connecticut organization, only three consultants work in-house with a law firm. The rest of them run their own consulting businesses.



Julie Dickinson helped create a local chapter of a national organization for legal nurse consultants to spread the word about consultants' roles in the legal process.

**A legal nurse consultant has clinical experience treating patients, and they're hired by both plaintiffs' and defense law firms, insurance companies and hospitals to analyze a variety of issues in the medical arena that become important during litigation.**

to interpret medical records and understand treatment procedures would help build a better case for the firm's clients.

The firm had never had a legal nurse consultant before.

"I really felt like they could understand the value of a nurse working for them," Dickinson said.

And they did, eventually.

Dickinson wasn't hired for the paralegal position but she saw that the firm advertised specifically for a legal nurse consultant several months later. That's when she landed the job.

"We found ourselves in a position where

Just as Dickinson sold her current employer on her expertise, she's attempting to do the same with the legal community at large as president of the Connecticut chapter of the American Association of Legal Nurse Consultants, which Dickinson helped create in January.

"We're trying to raise awareness because people don't know [legal nurse consultants] are out there," Dickinson said. "It doesn't seem to be well-known yet."

In fact, it's a fairly new niche for registered nurses. The national organization has existed since 1989 and includes about 3,500 members.

## Medical Expertise

Anytime a civil lawsuit involves any element of medical treatment, legal nurse consultants can get involved. They also can advise on criminal lawsuits involving rape or sexual assault, for example, when there's a need for expert testimony about interpreting test results or discussing treatment of victims. However, only nurses who are actively practicing in a hospital or clinic can serve as experts in court.

When Dickinson's office is notified of a lawsuit, she contacts the defendant to request medical records and charts to set up a timeline of treatment provided to the patient. Her experience working as an emergency room nurse for five years before becoming a nurse supervisor at Middlesex Hospital comes in handy.

"With my nursing background, I pick out

the key pieces of information that we need to keep an eye on," Dickinson said.

For example, in a lawsuit where a patient allegedly developed an infection due to medical negligence, Dickinson would focus on information related to the patient's body temperature, white blood cell count and antibiotics to determine whether medical personnel reacted appropriately under the circumstances.

**Don't renew your professional Liability until you get a quote from State National Insurance**

Most customers save an average of 20% - 30% in premiums while increasing their coverage!

### Some Sample Premiums:

Sole Practitioner	-	\$ 600 - \$ 1,901
2-3 Attorneys	-	\$1,901 - \$ 5,810
3-5 Attorneys	-	\$5,810 - \$ 7,411
5-10 Attorneys	-	\$7,411 - \$10,201

Go to

[www.FIRSTINDEMNITY.net](http://www.FIRSTINDEMNITY.net) and  
click on **APPLY NOW**

Please complete the application and mail/fax to our office with your letter head.

First Indemnity Insurance is the managing general agent for State National Insurance. We represent some of the finest insurance companies in the United States.

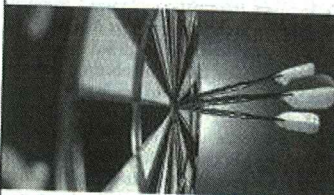
**\*State National is admitted in Connecticut**  
First Indemnity Insurance Specializes in  
Lawyers Professional Liability

*It's all we do and we are good at it.*

### First Indemnity Insurance:

420 Lexington Ave, Suite 300  
New York, NY 10170  
Phone: 1-800-982-1151 • Fax: 1-781-595-2279

**ex-act**  
lig-'zakt\ adj.  
capable of  
greatest precision



Kelly Law Registry® hits the target for all of your legal hiring needs. Contact us today.

**Anne Jennings, Esq.**  
New England Region  
860.247.7440  
anne\_jennings@kellylawregistry.com

**Julie Granser, Esq.**  
Fairfield/Westchester Region  
203.921.1175  
julie\_granser@kellylawregistry.com

Attorneys • Document Review Attorneys  
Paralegals • Contract Administrators  
Legal Assistants • Trial Consultants

**the Best** **KELLY**  
LAW REGISTRY

An Equal Opportunity Employer © 2010 Kelly Services, Inc. V0206

"The expertise we bring to cases is more valuable than I ever thought," said Rosale Lobo, a legal nurse consultant who runs her own business in Orange. "There's a shared respect with the attorneys we work with because of the information they're able to glean from nurses."

Lobo has been a registered nurse since the 1980s, and she started her own consulting business seven years ago to have more flexibility while raising her three children. She works exclusively with plaintiffs' firms because as a nurse, she saw instances where patients weren't always being treated properly.

Many of her cases involved misdiagnoses and negligent care.

Lobo also works across state lines while never leaving her office in Orange. She recently was involved in a Colorado case in which a 55-year-old man died from skin infections that developed from a blood vessel disease that affected his legs.

"My job was to take the case and figure out how he died," Lobo said. She discovered that nurses didn't properly treat the man's infections and that there were discrepancies in medical reports about what type of treatment the man received before his death.

The case settled confidentially for the plaintiff's estate.

Lobo said a lot of independent legal nurse consultants build up their businesses by word of mouth from attorneys who talk about how a consultant's input strengthened their case.

"A lot of medical malpractice attorneys take these cases without a nurse's help to interpret the issues," Lobo said. "But when a nurse is involved, it makes their knowledge of the issues that much clearer."

For more information about the Connecticut chapter of the American Association of Legal Nurse Consultants, visit [www.ctalnc.com](http://www.ctalnc.com).