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Doctors and Lawyers Join Forces
For the Greater Good

New York, NY (October 2, 2003) The juxtaposition of the words lawyer and doctor in the same sentence usually evokes negative images of malpractice suits, ambulance chasing and the medical liability insurance problem that's plaguing doctors in many states. But in the pediatric clinic at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital, the two professions actually have meshed quite nicely – physicians at the pediatric clinic have joined forces with the New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG) to establish a LegalHealth Clinic at St. Luke's Hospital. This partnership helps families who come into the pediatric clinic for treatment and who also are facing a multitude of nonmedical issues that often contribute to their medical problems.

LegalHealth, which was created two years ago, is a project of NYLAG, a not-for-profit law office providing free legal services to low income New Yorkers. The program functions as half clinic, half educational outreach. St. Luke's Hospital pediatricians identify problems such as living conditions that landlords have legal obligations to fix or school systems that fail to offer children the special education services they need. They also identify people who need to be linked to Social Security, disability benefits and other aid programs. Then, once a week, on Friday mornings during the pediatric clinic at the hospital, LegalHealth attorney Julie Brandfield comes in to help patients understand their legal rights to these benefits and services and navigate the system. "Now, patients facing health concerns have help with the added burden of legal issues," says Brandfield. In addition, LegalHealth has a number of training programs through which the doctors at St. Luke's learn to look differently at patient predicaments. "We want doctors to learn to think about the legal issues affecting patients and to partner with lawyers as we guide patients through the legal process." said LegalHealth's director Randye Retkin. This can involve making a phone call, writing a letter, helping fill out a form or making a court appearance.

The program helps pediatricians at St. Luke's Hospital provide more comprehensive healthcare for patients. "If I'm treating a patient for asthma but he is going home to an apartment that is infested with roaches and mice, the medical treatment is only going to go so far because the asthma is being perpetuated by poor housing conditions," says Peter Tesler, M.D., chief of ambulatory pediatrics at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center. "But if one of the LegalHealth lawyers can come in and help them take legal action against their landlord so the apartment gets cleaned up, it's more likely that the asthma will be kept in check and I won't see the child at the hospital as often." Healthcare costs that are associated with housing conditions, housing evacuation and education can be reduced when patients know how to target the underlying root of the problems, not just the symptoms.

The educational outreach component of LegalHealth offers classes to doctors, nurses, social workers and other healthcare professionals about more than 25 legal areas that affect low income patients so they can spot problems and learn where to send patients for help. This two-fold approach vastly increases the number of chronically ill New Yorkers who know their legal rights, which can lead to less frequent trips to the doctor or hospital. "The program has broadened my horizons to these issues so that when I ask my patients questions about their housing or nutrition, I have the resources to help them get what they need and are entitled to," says Dr. Tesler. "I am a better doctor because I can treat my patients both medically and nonmedically."

If you would like to interview Dr. Tesler, Randy Retkin, Julie Brandfield and/or a patient who has benefited from these services, please contact Elizabeth Dowling at 212/523-4047. For more information about NYLAG, please call 212-750-0800, ext. 124.

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