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Issue: July/August 2015

House Call

By Heide Aungst

Inspired by his own difficult diagnosis, Dr. Arman Askari founded Premier Health Advocates to help others facing medical issues.



Brad Ronevich

For Jay Smith, whose name has been changed to protect patient privacy, Premier Health Advocates has been a game changer for his seriously ill daughter, Lily.

Five years ago, at age 13, Lily began experiencing chronic pain, seizures and digestive issues. The family was then living in another large Midwest city and had exhausted the medical system there. The Smiths took their daughter to the Undiagnosed Disease Program at the Mayo Clinic, but still they were no closer to understanding the cause of her illness.

After moving to Cleveland, the family continued to experience frustrations with Lily's care. She was seeing up to 11 specialists in practices spanning hematology and neurology to rheumatology and gastroenterology. At times Lily's condition required treatment in the intensive care unit.

Then, about a year ago, a family friend told them about Premier Health Advocates, a service started by Dr. Arman Askari that helps patients navigate the complex and often uncommunicative health care system.

"A lot of people have one condition, one diagnosis," Smith says. "But when you're dealing with someone where there's five or eight different things going on, most doctors aren't really equipped to handle those types of cases."

Askari knows how frustrating it can be to navigate the health care system. He's experienced it as a cardiologist and a patient.

He always wanted to be a doctor like his father, Dr. Ali Askari, chief of rheumatology at University Hospitals Case Medical Center. For his fifth birthday, Askari received a stethoscope. After medical school, he completed his internship and residency at Harvard University, followed by a fellowship and position as a cardiologist at the Cleveland Clinic.

But about 13 years into practicing, Askari started experiencing worrisome symptoms, including extreme fatigue, sluggishness and rigidity. He was diagnosed with early-onset Parkinson's disease, a progressive, degenerative illness affecting the central nervous system (made famous by actor and advocate Michael J. Fox).

Although he kept his diagnosis secret at first, when Askari could no longer practice he was left wondering how he could still put his medical education to use helping patients.

“Parkinson’s is what I have, not who I am,” he says. Yet being on the other side of the health care system has helped make him a more empathetic patient advocate.

Following a procedure that would help administer his medications, Askari had extreme pain and felt he couldn’t breathe. He paged his physician numerous times, but the doctor wouldn’t return his calls. Finally, he tracked him down and went in for a procedure to get the relief he needed, asking two physician friends to stay nearby for support.

His desire to have physicians he trusted nearby helped cement the idea of using his medical knowledge to advocate for patients.

In 2010, he co-founded Premier Health Advocates. “It’s like having a doctor in the family,” Askari says.

The company educates patients, guides them through the health care maze, facilitates access to the right physicians, secures more timely appointments and clarifies communication between patients and doctors.

“We give clients questions to ask their physician to engage them,” Askari says. “Our work is as a liaison between the member and the physician, so they understand each other.” Askari’s wife, Jamie, whom he met at age 14, manages the company. PHA contracts with physicians to review cases and works directly with client-members. In addition, they have a network of doctors to bounce ideas off of or assist in getting a patient seen.

“They’re working for the patient, not the insurer or the health care system,” says Steve Millard, president and executive director of the Council of Smaller Enterprises, who has used the service for his family and offers it as a benefit to COSE’s employees and members.

“You become their client, and they’re helping you get the best outcome possible,” Millard says.

PHA succeeds in part because of the deficiencies in health care: long waits for appointments, accelerating costs and time-crunched physicians who provide insufficient care, make mistakes or order unnecessary tests.

The Leapfrog Group, a nonprofit that conducts hospital safety research, reports that medical errors are the third-leading cause of death in the U.S., behind heart disease and cancer.

According to Askari and the Institute of Medicine, 30 to 50 percent of health care dollars — \$750 billion to \$1.2 trillion a year — are wasted, with 27 percent of that total spent on unnecessary services and 17 percent on inefficient care.

PHA customers typically join through a company benefits plan, although individuals or families can pay a retainer and monthly fees for unlimited access to a physician-advocate. Members receive guidance as well as a certain number of doctor visits accompanied by their advocate. As part of a benefits package, the employer pays a monthly fee that allows employees to call for a consultation at no charge.

For large businesses, this means that PHA can help save some of those health care costs by getting the patient the right care, Millard explains. “For a larger company that is self-insured, health insurance expenses come off the bottom line. So if Arman’s team can help an employee not do an MRI or not do a drug treatment or something else that is unnecessary — or have them do an extra test that will reduce the long-term cost — that’s bottom-line dollars for a big company.”

In smaller, fully insured companies — like those COSE represents — PHA’s advantages go beyond cost savings.

“What they really provide is the ability for a small-business owner to feel a bit more in control when dealing with the health care system,” Millard says.

Marc Blaushild, president and CEO of Akron-based Famous Enterprises, was Askari’s first corporate client.

“We truly value work-life balance and wellness,” Blaushild says. “It was a natural fit to have it as an extension of our benefit offering.”

Askari says PHA’s numbers show that only about 1 to 2 percent of covered employees currently use the benefit, but he expects those numbers will continue to grow as clients share their stories and experiences.

After taking the Smith’s case, Askari met with the family and became an advocate for them. He assembled all the medical records and crafted a timeline of symptoms, tests and diagnoses by organ system. Finally, he began talking with each of Lily’s doctors.

“There were a number of doctors who literally had never read the case, and they were trying to treat her,” Smith says. “They were pursuing things that had been ruled out or were dead wrong.”

Askari began attending select appointments alongside the family — something that didn’t always sit well with the physician.

“They think they’re being second-guessed,” Askari says. “Health care is for the patient. It’s not for the doctor.”

Smith believes bringing Askari to appointments is one of the keys that helped Lily get more coordinated, specialized care.

“Arman would, in a very polite, nonadversarial manner, raise questions that would either help clarify the hypothesis or would shut down what people were chasing,” says Smith.

Askari also conveys information from the doctors to the family, without all the jargon.

“You have someone who can translate what the doctors are saying and what they’re not saying,” Smith says.

Ultimately, Askari helped the Smiths map a care strategy and found new physicians who are interested in working on cases like Lily’s. She is still chronically ill, but Smith says she’s getting the best care possible with PHA’s help.

“It’s the smartest money I could spend,” Smith says.

Such successes reinforce Askari’s strategy to grow by recruiting more physicians.

“My pie-in-the-sky plan is once this company grows enough to be self-sustaining, I want to start a nonprofit arm funded by donations so we can provide this service for people who can’t afford it,” Askari says.

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