

## At Your Service

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Most people admitted to a hospital on any given day didn't wake up that morning knowing that it would happen. Sure, those scheduled for surgery know they'll probably be staying a few days, and moms-to-be realize that a hospital stay is in their future.

But most admissions are through the emergency department and come with little or no warning. So the question of who will help them tie up the loose ends of their busy lives looms large in patients' minds. Who will pick up the mail? Walk the dog? See that those bills get paid before their due dates?

Hospitals have increasingly begun offering concierge services for their patients to help put their minds at ease so they can concentrate on getting well. Often, the service is an outgrowth of similar services offered to employees as a perk. Especially in more urban areas where hospitals compete for patients, concierge services are just another way to stand out in a crowd.

"We do a lot of deliveries for patients," said Kirsten Lecky, vice president of business development for Best Upon Request, a Cincinnati-based company that offers concierge services. "We pick up and deliver prescriptions, find hotel rooms for families from out of town, that sort of thing."

Requests can run the gamut, however. A patient was traveling to Chicago for a funeral but landed in a hospital in Denver, Lecky relates. The patient obviously wasn't going to make the funeral, but he had the deceased's remains with him. The hospital concierge figured out how the remains legally could be sent overnight to make the service.

The company has been offering patient concierge services for about five years, expanding into the patient space after inquiries from hospitals that were offering the service to employees. "Once you get employees used to the service and the value we provide, then they can attest the value to patients," Lecky said. "The nurse comes out as a hero because she comes up with a practical solution for a patient and puts his mind at rest so he can focus on healing."

### **Patients first**

Piedmont Hospital, a 500-bed facility in Atlanta that celebrated its centennial August 5, began offering patient concierge services in January.

Unlike many hospitals, Piedmont began the patient service first, broadening it to employees in July, said Marilyn Head, patient advocacy vice president. In spring 2004, Piedmont contacted 2 Places at 1 Time, an Atlanta-based concierge firm, about offering the service. A decision was delayed until the fall, when CEO Tim Stack suggested the service be offered to patients first, since they're the reason the hospital is in business. Then, if the program was successful, it would be offered to employees.

“There was a moment of truth when everyone recognized that this was the correct way to do it,” Head remembered of that meeting.

The concierge desk is staffed Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. The first hour is free, and each subsequent hour is \$5, not including the cost of any services. “Feedback has been extremely positive,” Head said. “It’s as simple as the delivery of The New York Times for long-term patients to running errands and sending cards. They help a lot of out-of-town family members with hair appointments and finding places to buy clothes.”

Piedmont will ask about the utility of the concierge service on its next employee survey to gauge worker use and acceptance.

The adoption of patient concierge services, or any hospital amenity, should be part of a long-term customer service strategy, said Catherine Baumgardner, a consultant at Corporate Health Group, Lancaster, Pa.

Every region, every city values something different in the way of amenities, Baumgardner said. “What’s an amenity in one area might be seen as an intrusion to another.”

Corporate Health Group works with senior leaders on a strategic level to help them weigh the need, cost, and advantage of varying amenities. The service includes interviews with patients to determine their needs and desires for a menu of services. More important, the company helps hospitals put the people, processes, and environment in place to achieve success.

“It’s not just offering the services. You have to have the foundation issues handled first,” Baumgardner says. “If you offer room service, but the food gets there late, is that an amenity? Probably not.”

She advises hospitals considering adding amenities to look at the big picture and understand what benefit they want to see before launching any program. “That happens so often, bringing in a program but not looking at the overall picture, so it becomes a joke,” Baumgardner said.

### **Competitive advantage**

A good concierge program can resonate with both employees and patients, said Andrea Novakoski, founder and president of 2 Places at 1 Time, the company that runs Piedmont Hospital’s concierge program.

“Healthcare is a very competitive market, and Atlanta is no exception,” Novakoski said. “This is a way for Piedmont to differentiate itself in the market. While it first was thought of as a competitive advantage for employees, it’s great for patients, too.”

Novakoski urges hospital administrators to check carefully the references and insurance of any potential concierge vendor. Because concierges often drive patients’ cars and enter their homes, the experience, reputation, and reliability of the concierge provider is vital, she said.

Although data is available on the benefit of concierge services for employees, evidence on the patient side mainly is anecdotal, said Lecky from Best Upon Request. Surveys of employees show that 50% of the time they save by using concierge services goes back into work, and 90% of employees say it improved their attitude toward the company.

Lecky and Novakoski agree that patient concierge services likely will produce improvements on customer satisfaction surveys because of the direct benefit they provide to patient care, helping them alleviate some of the stress that any hospital visit brings.

“People don’t plan on getting sick,” Novakoski said. “Offering these services just makes good business sense.”



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