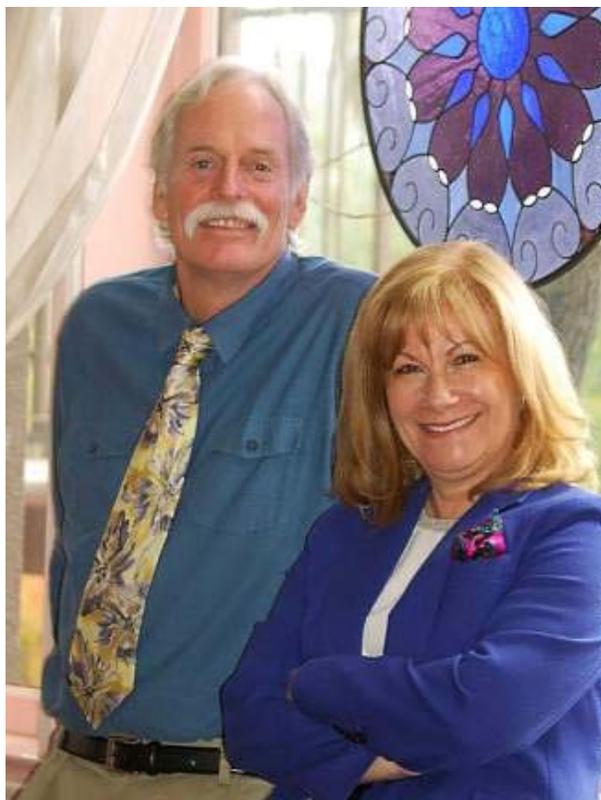




Cory Fisher
cfisher@theunion.com

April 4, 2016

Patient advocates: Helping people get what they want and need from medical care in Nevada County



Corbett Riley, a chiropractor, and nurse Melynda Ruckels have partnered to form Riley and Ruckels Patient Advocacy Services, a private consulting company that provides advocacy and guidance through the healthcare system. Patient advocacy is an emerging profession that empowers, educates and assists individuals in navigating the complexities of the healthcare system.

Corbett Riley had been a practicing chiropractor in Nevada County for more than 20 years when he was suddenly faced with health challenges of his own. Experiencing numbness in his legs, Riley's life became a series of costly tests and screenings, not to mention seemingly endless consultations with neurologists.

“The doctors were dropping some pretty serious words, like ‘multiple sclerosis,’ ‘Lyme disease,’ ‘Lou Gehrig’s disease’ and others,” he said. “Fortunately I knew enough to rule those out pretty quickly, but if I didn’t speak the language of the medical profession there would have been a lot more confusion, fear and expensive tests.”

It took more than a year to reach a diagnosis — an autoimmune disease — and Riley came away with a new perspective when it came to patient care. For the first time, he had seen firsthand that the healthcare system was too complicated, confusing and impersonal for many people. What would his experience have been like had he not understood his insurance coverage, known what questions to ask, or had the inside scoop on where to shop for more affordable tests, such as MRIs? The experience had opened his eyes to the profound need for patient advocacy.

For registered nurse Melynda Ruckels, it was her own acute appendicitis that opened her eyes to the perspective of a patient, despite 43 years' worth of nursing experience. She was on staff at Sierra Nevada Memorial Hospital Cardiac Rehabilitation from 2005 to 2015 and remains a nurse educator, mentor, and faculty member at the American River College nursing program. But it was a recent life-threatening emergency that reversed her usual role as a nurse and revealed the reality of being the patient. As she became her own advocate, she sensed the helplessness others might feel when they do not have the medical background to advocate for themselves.

“My appendectomy turned out to be more complicated and I was in two hospitals for a week,” she said. “As a nurse, I could tell when the care was not up to par — I could self-advocate. If I hadn't been a nurse, I wouldn't have had the knowledge I needed, such as what was hanging on my IV. Medicine is not what it used to be — today it's controlled by accountants, insurance companies and administration.”

With more than 65 years of combined experience in health care, Riley and Ruckels have partnered to form Riley and Ruckels Patient Advocacy Services, a private consulting company that provides guidance through the health care system. The growing profession aims to empower, educate and assist people in navigating the complexities of the medical world.

Riley and Ruckels Patient Advocacy Services assesses a client's health concerns and helps identify solutions specific to their values and lifestyles.

“We try to empower our clients to become proactive and well-informed participants in their own healthcare,” says Ruckels. “By assisting the client in planning for their medical appointments, they become active partners in their own healthcare management.”

Well-prepared clients are appreciated by physicians who are limited in the time they are allotted to see their patients. Consultations are provided both one-on-one, or with family members. Every client's case is reviewed by both Riley and Ruckels. The evaluation identifies the client's needs and is the baseline for the plan of care. Education is always emphasized.

Some of the services offered include accompanying clients to appointments and hospital bedsides; evaluating lifestyle and health concerns and identifying solutions; medication reviews; facilitating difficult decision making; locating appropriate doctors and hospitals specific to a certain diagnosis; interpreting test results and explaining treatment recommendations; researching viable treatment options; helping with understanding medical insurance; insurance claims and medical bill review/negotiation.

“We complement one another in terms of our expertise,” said Ruckels. “I know the hospital in and out, and Corbett is comfortable with insurance, billing, tests and primary care issues.”

Many clients are adult children living out of the area and are concerned about their parents when they can't be there, said Riley. A skilled professional is often needed to attend doctors' appointments, diagnostic procedures and help coordinate the care their parents require. Initially, they offer a 15-minute consultation, free of charge.

“Often our clients do not live locally,” says Ruckels. “With today's technology, it may be more efficient and cost-effective to consult with a client via phone, email or Skype.”

Riley and Ruckels emphasize that they do not diagnose, prescribe or take the place of the physician. Since they work solely for the individual, and not a hospital or insurance company, services provided are the responsibility of the client. They routinely sign HIPAA agreements and are therefore able to obtain medical records while providing a confidential, independent assessment of each client's case.

“My physicians do testing and diagnoses and offer some options, but often my appointments are not long enough and comprehensive enough for me to figure out a good, overall path to health,” said Erin Miller of Grass Valley. “Corbett helped me to interpret and understand the whole picture. On several occasions, while in pain or just emotionally broken down by a new, difficult health issue, having a health advocate has helped me develop a more direct route to comfort than I would have managed on my own. And having that person in my corner offers me peace of mind that is priceless.”

Ruckels completed an RN Patient Advocacy course through the University of Arizona, which has been celebrated as a model for patient care in the U.S. She also serves on the executive board of the National Network of independent RN Clinical Nurse Patient Advocates. Both she and Riley are members of the Alliance of Professional Health Advocates (www.APHA.org). For those interested in learning more, Riley and Ruckels will be lecturing on “How to Become an Empowered Patient” at 7 p.m. on April 14 in the main room of the Bret Harte Retirement at 350 West Main St. in Grass Valley. This event is open to the public, all ages, at no charge.

“Obviously we don't take the place of a physician,” said Ruckels. “But it's rewarding to see someone get results, knowing we were able to help with our expertise. We don't make decisions for our clients, but we present all options and make sure they're thoroughly educated. We're like coaches — we're on the sidelines — the periphery — empowering our clients.”

MORE INFORMATION:

Visit <http://rileyandruckelspatientadvocacy.com>

CONTACT:

Corbett Riley: 530-913-0249

Melynda Ruckels: 916-300-1263

©2016 - 2016 [Swift Communications, Inc.](#)