



Pittsburgh Chapter

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Considering a Career as a Legal Nurse Consultant?

Here are some Helpful Tips to get you Started

Faced with the realities of a constantly changing healthcare industry, nurses often explore new career opportunities focused on integrating their clinical expertise with other professional disciplines. One such career venture is the growing profession of Legal Nurse Consulting. This article is intended to provide practical tips for nurses interested in pursuing a career as a Legal Nurse Consultant (LNC). In addition, because of the insight often gained by learning from another individual's experience, featured in this article is an interview with an LNC with a successful, full-time, independent practice.

Helpful Tips:

As with any life-changing career decisions, it is important to verify that you understand the essence of the anticipated profession to ensure that it offers a career that fits your needs and abilities. These helpful tips may help you focus your investigation into legal nursing.

- ❑ Visit the web sites for local and national information pertaining to the bylaws, the guiding principles, and other related information.
- ❑ Attend the local chapter meetings to network and inquire about the profession.
- ❑ Avoid developing tunnel vision. All work is not related to medical malpractice cases, nor is it generated from law firms. Investigate the many different options for practice as an the LNC, including personal injury, worker's compensation, toxic tort, criminal law, risk management, insurance company reviews, etc.
- ❑ Experience/Expertise in nursing is essential; therefore, examine where you are now, in terms of your experience/expertise, and then determine what additional education, and/or job experiences, you will require to be successful in the LNC profession.
- ❑ Examine your own strengths and abilities. Your experience may be the most valuable factor to your success, but a professional LNC also needs to be able to analyze medical records, research the medical literature, and write.
- ❑ There is no one "Magic" product/course that will make you into an overnight success at anything. Most often a common sense practical approach will be your best guiding factor.
- ❑ Purchase and subscribe to related literature (e.g., reference books, peer-reviewed scientific periodicals, authoritative treatises), or identify a mechanism through which you will have ready access to the medical and nursing literature.
- ❑ Attend conferences, take courses, and review the literature to keep abreast of the current trends in patient care, *and* legal nursing.

- ❑ Should you choose to become certified in the profession, carefully evaluate the source for the certification. Not all certification programs are the same. When considering which certification to obtain, keep in mind credibility issues associated with the certification course. National associations are most often viewed as the governing bodies of organizations/professional disciplines, thus, obtaining your certification from the organization's national association may be another avenue by which you can add to your credibility as a LNC. However, as with all certifications, you should first consider the pros and cons of becoming certified relative to your area of practice (e.g., in-house hospital/legal environment versus independent/expert witness).
- ❑ There are many options available to begin preparation for a career as a LNC, and we recommend that you carefully evaluate all of your options and choose a path with a realistic approach to accomplishing your goals. To give you additional food-for thought, the following interview with Pam Rice of Rice Medical-Legal Association provides some practical insights into developing and maintaining an independent LNC practice.

❑ In 1995 Pamela Rice, BSN, RN, CGRN entered into the profession of legal nursing, following a long clinical career, including many years of staff nursing and then managing a sizable gastroenterology practice, which required that she develop many diverse roles. She brought a wealth of academic, clinical, and business skills to her LNC practice. She, like many LNCs, started her business after taking a course designed to train nurses to become legal nurse consultants. She attended the LNC seminars, purchased audiotapes and read extensively to prepare for this "line of work." Now six years later and working full time in her own "exclusively plaintiff" LNC business, she offered her views on facets of the business that she believes beginning LNCs should consider.

Nurses looking for a job that they can do from home and make significant hourly wages, must recognize the importance of having a certain foundation in order to achieve success in the business. According to Ms. Rice, too often advertisements imply that, "Any nurse can take a LNC preparation course and be ready to do the work, however," she states, "that just is not the case. I [Ms. Rice] believe it should be emphasized to nurses entering this field that they must come with extensive clinical experience, and at least some business management knowledge."

"Marketing is only one aspect of the business side of this adventure, and from my experience [Ms. Rice], it seems to be the only aspect of the business that is mentioned in preparation courses. In reality, often times marketing tends to be only a minor issue, as LNC's become invested in this work." As stated by Ms. Rice: "I can't emphasize enough how important it is for nurses who consider working in an independent practice to have a prerequisite sense of running a business. Although a MBA may not be necessary, some knowledge of accounting principles, business-writing skills, and marketing principles is essential. For example, mechanisms for invoicing, tracking accounts receivable and payables, collection procedures, etc., are some of the basic financial activities in any business. A good accounting program will take

care of a good deal of this. But you have to know how to organize it, and at least, understand a 'chart of accounts'."

Additionally she states, "Many nurses have no idea how to successfully write a business letter, or a 'consult' letter. Nurses do not naturally acquire even basic secretarial skills in their daily work." A nurse entering the business of legal consulting will need to know how to format a letter, and turn out a polished work product. Computer skills and research skills are also a necessity. As stated by Ms. Rice: "I've received calls from nurses ready to jump into this who barely know how to use a word processing program and are not even on the Internet". Most often, nurses would be able to learn this in a relatively short amount of time, however it is important to be aware of these necessary skills upfront.

In Ms. Rice's experience, she has found that often, nurses are not aware of the importance of clinical experience as an essential element for the LNC profession. She shared that "I've been approached by nurses who hated clinical nursing, or the hours required after a year or less and want to do this work". She also shared one such example as follows: "During a conversation with one of the Red Cross nurses, I was asked what I do for a living. When I responded with the nature of my business as a LNC, her eyes lit up and she said, 'That sounds perfect for me! I could work at home!' When I asked what her experience was she told me she had worked for 3 months at one of the local hospitals and just hated it, and that she had figured out real fast that she did not want to be pushed around on different shifts. She went to work for the Red Cross and had been doing that for 1-1/2 years. With less than 2 years experience in nursing at all, and only 3 months with any real clinical, I told her she just didn't have enough experience. She was totally deflated, and I'm sure she didn't believe me. However from my point of view I say, 'better deflated and dejected than broke and depressed.'"

Glossy ads suggesting that you can earn \$60 - 120 per hour, working from your home can be misleading. As stated by Ms. Rice: "Consultants like me make more in the range of \$65 - 85/hr., depending upon venue and experience. I know one area where LNCs can't get \$50 per hour." Ms. Rice shared that a nurse could be misled, and think that for roughly a \$2,000 investment and then charging a kind of middle of the road fee of \$100 per hour, she could recoup her investment in twenty hours. **The reality:** A beginning LNC might be fortunate to bill twenty hours of work in six months, just starting out, from which startup expenses must be deducted. The new LNC may "talk one local attorney into giving her a case that amounts to three hours of billable time; and that could be her only work, for her first six months to a year. Now what?"

Additionally, advertisements suggest that in just one week you can become certified as a Legal Nurse Consultant and "ready to practice", but many nurses have found that this proves to be an unrealistic expectation without prior related experience and a solid clinical knowledge base.

Start-up Costs: To build a home office, a LNC will need a good computer, Internet access and at least one good online research related service, for which there will be a monthly fee. The LNC also needs to have access to a good medical library. In addition, stationary, business cards, marketing tools such as brochures, etc., as well as a different malpractice policy for “self-employed”, and business insurance are all additional costs. She recommends that the LNC considers consulting a business attorney and a CPA, and joining, at the very least, the national AALNC. In reality, the startup cost is going to be in the ballpark of \$3 - 5K, depending upon how well it is done and what deals are available. Additional tools that could be added to the basic LNC office could include a cell phone, beeper, a scanner, and a laptop. These other pieces of equipment that make the LNC’s life easier could easily raise the start up costs to a \$7K investment.

In summary, although Ms. Rice’s home base is in a small community in Bloomington, Illinois, her practice involves working for attorneys all over America. We hope her insights provide additional insights for nurses venturing into this career.