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Patient liaison program makes overseas medical care transition easy

Heidelberg, Germany – Moving to a new country for the first time, traveling and experiencing new cultures -- these can all be enjoyable and exciting experiences for Soldiers and their families and for DoD employees. On the other hand, some changes and new experiences can be a little daunting or even a bit overwhelming. That need not be the case with your health care.

Here in Europe, beneficiaries have access to a patient liaison program that was especially designed to make the overseas medical care transition easy and comfortable for patients. Patient liaisons are here to ensure patients hospitalized in a host nation civilian hospital have a positive health care experience. Liaisons are available at all Army clinics in Europe to address any concerns or questions that patients have about host nation health care. They also visit and assist patients who are hospitalized in a local civilian health care facility. Should concerns arise for any reason patients are always welcome to discuss their concerns about doctor visits or hospitalization with the TRICARE Service Center counselors or with the host nation patient liaisons. Information about the patient liaison program is routinely provided when patients process their paperwork for admission to a local civilian hospital through their TRICARE Service Center. During emergency hospital admissions, patients may access patient liaison services through military police or the medical staff duty officers at the Army Hospitals.

“Host nation or civilian doctors and hospitals augment the military medical care system here in Europe,” said Lt. Col. Lois Borsay, Staff Officer, Europe Regional Medical Command (ERMC). “During deployments, redeployments and summer rotations, we may refer more patients to these health care providers. The patient liaison program is in place to provide hospitalization continuity of care between military medical beneficiaries and their local clinic or hospital providers. Additionally, patient liaisons assist patients who are concerned or who may be somewhat apprehensive about seeing a non-military healthcare provider – whether it is because of language, cultural differences or for any other reason. These services are available at every US medical clinic and hospital in Europe.

“The quality of patient care in the civilian sector is monitored by US military medical personnel and I assure you that it is excellent,” she said. “Our goal is to help our patients be comfortable and confident in the healthcare they receive whether it is at one of our military hospitals or clinics or with a local provider downtown.”

Col. James Rundell, TRICARE Europe Executive Director, added that a military quality-monitoring program is your assurance that you will receive the best care possible from our Preferred Provider Network (PPN) of host nation health care providers, regardless of where you live in Europe. “Military medical treatment facility and TRICARE Europe officials gather information about providers in the network from patient surveys, consultation report reviews, and other feedback tools. That information is used to make the system better. Quality monitoring helps us ensure that each member of the PPN continues to meet our expectations for care.

Patient feedback is overwhelmingly positive about the host nation network providers and matches or exceeds the overall satisfaction rate with providers used by TRICARE beneficiaries in the United States,” he said.

Lesley Lehwald-Verron, Host Nation Patient Liaison Consultant, ERMIC, echoes those sentiments. “There are about 68 liaisons throughout Europe and they all speak English as well as the language of the respective country where they support US military medical beneficiaries. I think the biggest fear for our patients is the fear of the unknown. Our customer comment cards reflect very high satisfaction rates with host nation care. It’s just sometimes a little scary taking that first step into an unknown environment. Once that is done, most people are delighted and continue to go back to their host nation health care provider,” she said.

“The biggest issue our patients may actually experience when visiting a non-US doctor, is the language barrier that may occur while being screened to see the host nation health care provider,” she said. “The provider almost always speaks excellent English, but that may not always be the case with some of the medical support staff. Appointment finders or patient liaisons can assist and help prepare patients for cultural differences.”

Lehwald-Verron, who is also a patient liaison officer at the Heidelberg military hospital, added that the patient liaison service is free of charge and that local patient liaisons will visit any hospitalized military identification card holder who requests assistance. Patient liaisons can answer an array of questions including information about the local hospital including translations, discharge instructions, what to expect with regard to food, procedures, visiting hours, cultural differences, length of stay and what personal items patients may need to take with them. They can do this because they work to develop and maintain relationships with these local medical doctors and their office or hospital personnel in the TRICARE PPN.

According to Lehwald-Verron, one group of patients often referred to local physicians is pregnant patients. These moms-to-be may request a tour of the maternity ward at the civilian hospitals -- allowing couples to see where they will be going and understand and feel comfortable with the local processes.

“This helps a lot,” she said. “For example, here in Heidelberg, at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital, moms who go for routine obstetric care are actually given a tour by their German doctor. It’s really great.”

When patients request assistance from the local patient liaison, that liaison will visit them in the hospital each workday. Patient liaisons are also on call if needs arise during evenings, weekends or holidays. Patients who want liaison support should contact their local military hospital or clinic prior to hospital admission to request this assistance if possible. Once the request for assistance is made, the liaison will ensure the patient is receiving appropriate care, answer questions about procedures as well as interface with patients, family members and local national doctors and hospital staff.

Host nation patient liaisons hours are from 7:30 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. during routine workdays and an on-call patient liaison is available during evenings, weekends and holidays if patients have an urgent request. Patient liaison visitation on weekends and holidays is for usually reserved for emergency or urgent matters. Oftentimes patient or family concerns may be resolved telephonically but liaisons will not hesitate to come to host nation hospitals and clinics at any time if needed to resolve a patients issue or concern.

For more information contact your local military hospital or clinic TRICARE Service Center.