

# HMO's Senior Enrollees Hear a Familiar Voice

BY RHODA WEISS

**S**enior citizens enrolled in Medicare HMOs are often uneasy with what they see as depersonalized service. They especially complain about being put on hold for a long time by service representatives who show little empathy with their problems. Dealing with such "bureaucrats" makes them feel helpless and disconnected, seniors say.

But CareAmerica, a company based in southern California, is addressing the depersonalization issue. In May the company's CareAmerica 65 Plus health plan, which serves 40,000 seniors, launched a new customer service program it calls the Personal Advisor. CareAmerica hopes the program will cause its enrollees to see the company as a friend.

## A FAMILIAR, FRIENDLY VOICE

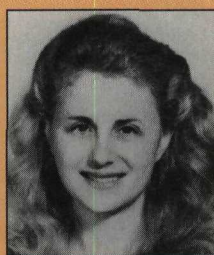
In the new service, employees known as "personal advisors" are assigned a hospital (or group of hospitals) and those enrollees who receive their care at it. The personal advisors get to know both the hospitals and the physician groups associated with them, on one hand, and the enrollees and their circumstances and concerns, on the other. Even if enrollees should change physician groups, they keep the same personal advisors (as long as they do not also change hospitals). Thus, when an enrollee calls the plan seeking help, he or she can count on being greeted by a familiar voice.

"By providing a member with his or her own personal advisor, we are giving each member a name and a voice they can count on," says Ross Goldberg, CareAmerica's senior vice president for communications and marketing.

## HOW THE SERVICE WORKS

The service currently has 17 personal advisors, each of whom has his or her own 800 phone number and a backup team of four or five assistants. Personal advisors perform two primary duties:

- They respond to requests for information or other aid from their assigned enrollees.



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- They develop relationships with the staffs of physician groups in their assigned areas. These relationships help them facilitate follow-up efforts on behalf of enrollees.


The backup teams field calls from enrollees when the personal advisors cannot do so. "We wanted to retain the personal touch even when the personal advisor is busy," says Goldberg. "We wanted someone to come on the line immediately and tell the enrollee, 'I'm sorry, but Jane is not available. Can I help you, or would you prefer to wait for Jane?'"

## POPULAR PROGRAM

CareAmerica began its new service by sending each enrollee a personalized letter that explained the program and listed the personal advisor's name and toll-free telephone number, which the enrollee was encouraged to use instead of the company's busy customer service line. At the same time, it launched an advertising campaign, employing direct-mail and newspaper and TV ads. Many of the personal advisors appeared in these ads.

The program is already a success. Soon after the company mailed its personalized letters and began its advertising campaign, the volume of phone calls it received increased dramatically. "We had enrollees call just to see if the personal advisor named in the letter would actually answer the phone," says Goldberg. And the volume of calls has remained high, he adds, up 50 percent over the same period in 1995.

Besides performing their primary tasks, some personal advisors also attend orientation meetings for new enrollees, join CareAmerica sales representatives on visits to the homes of potential enrollees, and participate with enrollees in self-care classes. For many enrollees, their personal advisor is fast becoming a familiar face as well as a familiar voice. □

 For more information, call Ross Goldberg at CareAmerica, 818-228-4444.