Ask a Lawyer

Making Professional Referrals

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Abstract

Lamaze Certified Childbirth Educators have a duty to their clients to make referrals to qualified professionals—in this case, to an expert in nutrition, a dietician. A reasonable way to assure a quality referral is to contact the appropriate professional organization.

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Question

I have read and discussed the question of helping expectant mothers choose a physician or midwife. I feel comfortable with that, partly because I know a number of physicians and midwives in my community. My problem comes when I do not know an expert. Right now I have a mother in my class who is very concerned about nutrition. She feels that her diet may have caused problems with her first pregnancy. She claims that her doctor just tells her to take her prenatal vitamins and not to worry. I have given her the materials that I have for the class, but she has a lot more questions. She wants to know more about folic acid, about the chemical structure of white flour versus sugar, about all kinds of things that are beyond my training. I know the hospital has a dietician, but she is not available for private counseling. How can I make the right referral for this woman?

—An LCCE who had a nutrition course years ago

Answer

You are on the right track in assuming that your referral must be “right.” In situations like this, you have a couple of options. The first is the personal approach, and the

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second is the professional resources approach. This is the same process, whether the referral is for nutritional counseling, as in your situation, or for some other service, such as acupuncture or physical therapy, or for a pediatric nurse practitioner.

First, you can talk to other professionals. Perhaps the hospital dietician, other childbirth educators, a nurse practitioner, or a physician has worked with or recently made a referral for nutritional counseling in your community. Ask not only the identity of their expert, but also what they find to be his or her strengths and weaknesses. If there is a local college or university, you can call there and ask to speak with faculty who teach nutrition courses. This is what I mean by “the personal approach.” Because you say that you do not know an expert, it is likely that you have already asked some of the people with whom you work about a referral for nutritional counseling. Even if you succeed in getting a personal recommendation, your search is not finished. You still have a professional duty to your client to confirm that the “expert” is truly qualified to counsel your client. Then your referral is really “right.”

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That brings me to your second step, which is also your second option. Experts in nutrition, or dieticians, have a professional organization, as do other professionals or experts. Contact the professional organization. Just as Lamaze International is a reliable source of information about qualified childbirth educators, other professional organizations are a good source of information about qualified practitioners in their fields. Finding the right professional organization is not difficult, especially if you remember to ask this question while speaking to the hospital dietician or the college faculty member. If you forget to ask, you can usually find it quickly just

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by going to the Internet and using a search engine like “Yahoo.” Learning the identity of relevant professional organizations is a goal that the public can expect us as childbirth educators to set for ourselves. These organizations are good resources for childbirth educators as well as for our clients.

The professional organization that you want to contact in this case is the American Dietetic Association. They have an excellent web page (www.eatright.com). It includes a “Find a Dietician” option that will help you or your client locate qualified dieticians in your area. It also is a wonderful source of information directly to dieticians and to the public. When I pulled up their web page before writing this response to you, guess what was on the home page? Their feature was “Breastfeeding Basics!” It is a nice write-up addressing nutritional concerns of breastfeeding mothers.

With the above procedure, you are in an excellent position to make any referral, whether or not you personally know the expert. You can do some searching on your own, or you can assign this work to your client. If your client has access to the Internet, for example, it is perfectly all right to say, “I have not personally worked with a local dietician. But if you check their professional web page, you may find the information you need, as well as a local nutritional counselor who can give you the personal advice that you deserve. You want to start with the web page of the American Dietetic Association, and it is”

Using the professional organization in combination with personal contacts (when available) is a reasonable way to assure yourself that you have met your duty to make referrals that meet your quality standards.