

Telephone Triage

Nursing patients back to health, 24/7

By Laura Stella Reyes

Melissa Martinez is known for being a helper. Aside from being a devoted wife, aunt and godmother, she spends the majority of her days helping guide patients back to recovery.

As a part-time telephone triage nurse, Martinez provides personalized care to people nationwide.

“When I was in college, I related nurses to hospitals and bedside care, but in the past years, specialties have really grown. There are now more ways to help people get the proper care they need,” says Martinez, who earned her Bachelor of Science in Nursing from the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio.

Working from home is ideal for nurses interested in working independently, while still providing one-to-one care with people.

For the last six years, Martinez, 30, has been a registered nurse with a local hospital birthing center. Her 12-hour shifts can take their toll on her physically. She, like many people, decided to take a second job in hopes of transitioning from a fast-paced work environment to the calmer setting of her own home.

“Some nurses can handle all the work and pace, but I know what works for me. Working from home allows me to continue helping people, while taking care of myself too,” she says.

Since February, she’s been part-time with Coventry Worker’s Comp Services early intervention

nurse triage program, NT24.

The group provides client employees access to RNs via a toll-free telephone number whenever an on-the-job injury occurs. NT24 RNs do a thorough assessment of the employees’ injuries and symptoms, and provide them with information on how and where to get the appropriate treatment. Referring patients to the right provider often reduces unnecessary hospital visits and costs.

“We function like an emergency room. Calls come in, we find out what happened, how it happened and if their injuries are urgent or non-urgent,” says Martinez, adding that her job is to help every employee get back

to work fast, and in good health.

On an average day, calls range from cat scratches and backaches, to more serious injuries, like burns, deep lacerations and head injuries. With Coventry’s nationwide service, every employee is guided according to their state’s worker’s comp law. Some employees will often speak with an injury report specialist prior to speaking with a telephone triage nurse, depending on the situation. Martinez knows that there may be the occasional distressed employee call.

“It can be a challenge not being able to visualize the injury. We rely on description, but we always give first-aid instruction, reassure them calmly and

guide them.”

Some wonder if telephone triage can replace the face-to-face experience of nursing. Martinez believes a good nurse can do her job in person and over the phone.

“In this job, your voice is your face, just as if you were in a hospital. You need to smile when you speak; you have to be courteous, calm and soothing in order to soothe them.”

Martinez knows what it is like to be on the other side of those calls. As a teenager, she was diagnosed with hydronephrosis and had surgery to remove a damaged kidney. Her hospital experience is what inspired her dedication to becoming a nurse.

“The nurses I had were



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really great and truly showed their concern for me. I was just a kid and I was scared, but they made sure I was comfortable. I knew that one day I was going to do that for someone else.”

As the health care industry continues to grow, so does the demand for nurses. According to U.S. News & World Report’s, “The 50 Best Careers of 2010,” nursing has continued to remain on the positive spectrum of future job growth throughout the recession. Job growth is expected to rise even more within the next ten years.

With numerous specialties available, nurses with experience in a hospital, surgical or clinical setting can become telephone triage or advice nurses. Hiring companies look for personable, professional and experienced nurses. In states like Wisconsin, Indiana and Texas, job postings list similar desirable skills: strong crisis prevention, problem-solving and decision-making skills, along with excellent computer skills. Bilingual nurses are also in demand. While some health care agencies require one year of recent experience in an acute care setting, many others require a minimum of 3 years.

The biggest challenge for most nurses transitioning to a work-from-home career is the sudden loss of a team within arm’s reach.

“At first, I really felt alone. I didn’t have the comfort of walking up to someone to ask for advice. Thankfully, I had

great training and my co-workers are awesome and great to work with, always willing and ready to answer questions,” says Martinez. Telephone triage nurses communicate via instant messenger, email and phone.

Depending on the health care agency, telephone triage nurse duties can range from consultations, education and advice, to referring patients or scheduling appointments with providers. They may also offer information for self-care and symptom management. This type of medical care is helpful to patients unable to leave their homes or jobs when an injury occurs. It is especially valuable to immobile patients, including the elderly. Work hours vary and schedules are set months in advance.

The nursing field in general can make it difficult to spend time with family, but Martinez says it’s helpful to have a supportive family. Her husband Angel knows how hard it is for his wife to work long hours. He says he’s thankful for companies like Coventry.

“With her working from home now, I can just pop my head in and say ‘hi.’ I can sit with her during her breaks or we can eat lunch together. It makes things easier,” he says.

Martinez says when she first learned about telephone triage, she did her research and decided what would be best for her and her family.

“I’m glad I took the leap. The job is ever changing and I’m looking forward to what it brings.”

School tips for keeping diabetes in check

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Families of children with diabetes know that maintaining a consistent monitoring schedule is crucial and requires thoughtful preparation. Using these tips, however, can make you and your child feel more confident and prepared for managing diabetes, and everything related, while at school.



- Give your child a medical alert bracelet.
- Provide your child’s teacher and school nurse with emergency phone numbers for you and your child’s doctor.
- Remind your child to check his or her supply box often to make sure it is adequately stocked with everything he or she needs.

These include:

- A blood glucose monitor, such as Bayer’s CONTOUR meter
- Testing strips
- Lancing devices
- Blood sugar logbook (if your child is unable to log onto his/her diabetes management software).
- Insulin pens or traditional syringes and insulin.
- An extra infusion set with tubing and a reservoir if your child uses an insulin pump
- Alcohol swabs and tissues for your child’s fingers
- A juice box or glucose tabs to counteract low blood sugar
- Repeat glucagon kit.
- Snacks, like granola bars, fruits or veggies
- An extra glucagon kit