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Taking care to the next level

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Susanne Wise began Take Care of Sarasota Inc. 14 years ago with three employees and a belief that home health care's popularity was poised to skyrocket.

In addition to Wise, a registered nurse, the employee pool consisted of another nurse, a staffer to do accounting and another to handle scheduling. The four shared a cramped office on Jo-Ann Drive in Sarasota.

Today, Take Care is the region's largest home health provider, with four offices, more than 425 clients, 600 employees and annual revenue that tops \$15 million annually -- a nearly 40 percent increase from 2001.

But instead of being satisfied with her accomplishments or the numbers, Wise has laid the foundation for what she considers the next dimension in home health services: Care management.

"The approach we're taking is, we want to help introduce certain best practices, in training and maintenance," said Wise, 54. "It became an obvious extension for us, to provide oversight and advocacy."

To quickly meet the need in what is fast becoming a more aged population, Wise has partnered with My Health Care Manager, an Indianapolis firm that is bringing



E. SKYLAR LITHERLAND

Goldiejean Turow gets some assistance from Take Care nursing assistant Jennifer Hull, as Turow, who has lost toes due to scleroderma, works on balance and stability exercises April 16 at her Longboat Key home.

to health care what Ford brought to building cars -- a systematic approach capable of being tracked, analyzed and improved.

Wise's Take Care Advisor is developing electronic health care records for clients and their families. And because the data is stored on the Internet, family members nationwide can access the Web-based portal anytime.

With Take Care Advisor, Wise hopes to capture a new raft of clients who will require home health care next month or even next year. Wise's daughter, Courtney, now runs the operation.

"We're finding companies around the country that are similar to Take Care, but we've not found anyone that's as well managed, or as successful," said Alan Stanford, who began My Health Care Advisor four years ago, and is working to develop affiliations nationwide. "Susanne's remarkable. You have a real jewel there."

Looking 'outside the box'

Wise came to home health care via nursing, which she studied in her home state of Michigan. A former director of nursing for Metro Nursing in Sarasota, Wise saw firsthand how Medicare and the health care industry as a whole was fragmented and sometimes stifled care.

"It was very boxed in, and I like to look outside the box," Wise said. "Basically, I had a passion for this. I'm not convinced, even now, that I ever thought I could do this, but I didn't know at the time what doing this was."

Building on her nursing background, Wise obtained an MBA degree at Nova Southeastern University in Tampa before launching Take Care.

Today, despite the opportunities the care management business provides, Wise said Take Care's focus will remain with home health care.

"This will always be my priority: the people and the staff," Wise said.

The company's average client age these days is 85, and company fees range from \$17.75 an hour to \$37 an hour, depending on the caregivers' skill level and the number of hours spent with a client.

The cost of 24-hour care -- a portion of which can be picked up by long-term care and some other forms of insurance -- is \$6,000 a week.

Regardless of whether the home health services are done by a companion or a skilled nurse, all Take Care employees do light cleaning and laundry; fix meals; help with medications; and provide other services, such as physical therapy.

"I've had three major surgeries, and they've been right there with me every step of the way," said Marjorie Stapleton, 85, a Take Care client for the past seven years. "I couldn't get along without them. I believe in them 100 percent."

And as much as Take Care helps seniors remain independent and in their homes, the company has also allowed grown children across the country peace of mind in regard to their parents.

"They said they'd be my mother's daughter on the ground there, and that's what they've turned out to be," said Patricia Wiley, a New Yorker whose 80-year-old mother has been a Take Care client for a year.

"They've allowed my mother to stay in her home, which is important because she doesn't want to move," Wiley added. "Take Care has also helped us stay ahead of the next thing, in regards to her health."

Take Care is not perfect, of course. In October 2007, the state cited the company for failing to "honor patient rights with regards to confidentiality," after a staffer shared patient information without permission.

The violation was cleared within a month, according to the state Agency for Health Care Administration records, when Take Care put new disclosure documentation procedures in place.

The deficiency was a rare black mark against Take Care, which has received near-spotless inspections from AHCA, a regulatory agency, dating to August 2005, records show.

The advantages of being big

Though Wise never intended the company to become the biggest home health provider in Southwest Florida, Take Care's size has proven to be an advantage over competitors such as Right at Home, NurseCore, Senior Home Companions and dozens of other firms.

Wise said that being the biggest has allowed Take Care to hire the most qualified employees. As an added precaution, the company also conducts background and

reference checks.

And unlike some of the smaller home health companies, Wise said, Take Care provides employees with workers' compensation, maintains liability insurance and is bonded.

The company's size has also bought cost savings, and allowed Take Care to freeze its rates during the economic downturn. Additionally, Take Care employees are available 24 hours a day.

Size has provided the company with the ability to expand, too. In 2000, Take Care introduced non-emergency transportation for clients.

Charging between \$50 and \$100 per trip, the company's transport vans primarily offer service to medical appointments.

"It's part of what we want to do, which is create an umbrella of services," Wise said.

Over the next five years or so, Wise foresees Take Care Advisor growing rapidly. If projections hold, the advisory business will open additional offices between now and 2014.

Take Care intends to expand, too. Wise is readying a training center in the company's Bee Ridge Road headquarters that will train staff and enhance skills. Eventually, she hopes to open it to clients' families.

A client newsletter is in the works as well, to improve communication between the company, clients and their families.

Take Care is also exploring a push south, into Charlotte County and possibly Lee County, in response to client requests.

"One thing I know is, change is good in this business," Wise said. "You're constantly changing equipment, computers, there are new medications, and that's really good. But one thing I will not change, one thing we'll always keep in the forefront, is how we meet with the client and how we address the client's needs."

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