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a call for help...

a look at a new after-hours call center



By
Joanna
Norris

A wasp stings your child. Your pediatrician's office is already closed and you don't know whether you should go to the emergency room or not. You feel awful about calling your doctor after hours.

But you remember your pediatrician telling you about an after-hours call center, where you can get medical help. You call and reach a trained professional who asks you a series of questions. You're instructed on how to take care of the sting and your child ends up being fine; you have peace of mind and didn't have to be seen in the doctor's office or endure a late-night wait at the emergency room.

This after-hours telephone triage service, called Nurse Response, has been in Jacksonville since late August, but is currently only offered to patients of one local pediatrician's office. However, the goal is for this to eventually become a citywide service.

Aylin Ozdemir, M.D., of Pediatric Associates of Jacksonville, the city's largest pediatric practice, has led the initiative to bring Nurse Response to the First Coast. Ozdemir felt an after-hours triage service was necessary because her practice is so large. Pediatric Associates of Jacksonville has four offices—one in Arlington, the Westside, Orange Park and Ponte Vedra Beach.

NURSE RESPONSE:
"Hello, my name is Sharon I'm a nurse working with Dr. Smith this evening, how may I help you?"

PARENT:
"This is Mrs. Doe, I'm calling about my daughter, Kaylee Doe, who has had a sore throat for the past three days and she's getting worse!"

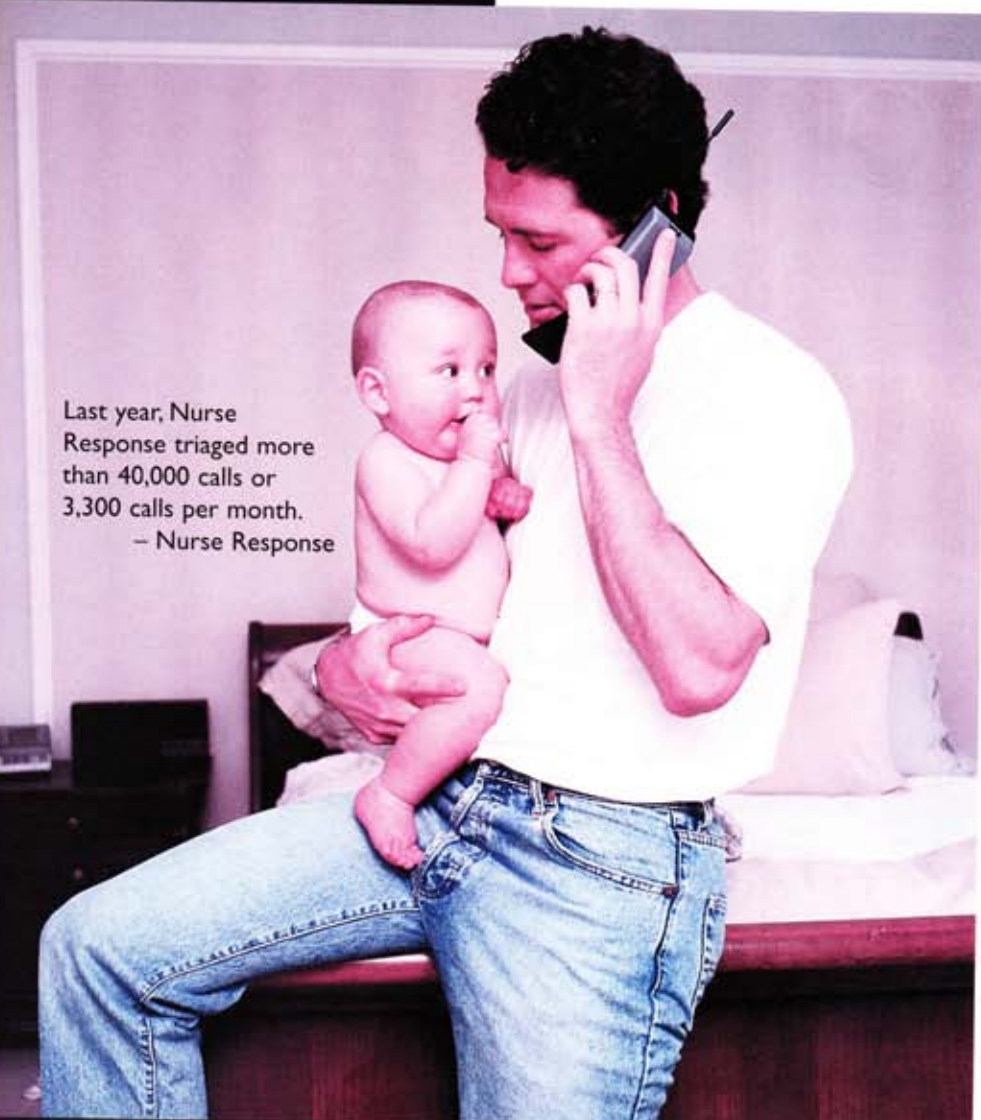
NURSE RESPONSE:
Let me ask you a few questions

that will assist us in giving you important information that will help Kaylee and address your concerns. Please begin by describing what you noticed about Kaylee's condition that prompted you to call tonight."

The nurse assesses the situation and follows a series of triage algorithms or protocols developed by the nationally renowned Dr. Barton Schmitt. Based on the answers, a computer program prioritizes the calls from a high

degree of urgency to the lowest, then appropriate care advice is given.

NURSE RESPONSE:
"Thank you Mrs. Doe for calling about Kaylee. With your permission, I will fax over to Dr. Smith's office the information taken and your agreement to follow the recommended care advice given. Please call back if you have any further questions and we will be happy to help you."

A photograph of a man with dark hair, wearing a white t-shirt and blue jeans, sitting on a bed. He is holding a baby in his left arm and talking on a mobile phone held to his ear with his right hand. The background shows a bedroom setting with a bed and a nightstand.

Last year, Nurse Response triaged more than 40,000 calls or 3,300 calls per month.
— Nurse Response

“Our volume of patients in four offices is incredible. Our goal is to be able to provide a continuity of care for our patients after hours.”

— Aylin Ozdemir, M.D.,
of Pediatric Associates
of Jacksonville

“Our volume of patients in four offices is incredible,” says Ozdemir, medical director of the Westside branch. “Our goal is to be able to provide a continuity of care for our patients after hours.”

She also thought the after-hours call center was necessary because of the toll it was taking on on-call physicians. “One on-call physician used to take calls for all four offices after hours. Jacksonville is growing so fast that it was really stretching our on-call physician’s hours to 12 hours a day.”

Since the after-hours call center was first initiated, Ozdemir says she has seen an improved quality of care by physicians. “The bulk of physicians’ phone calls are triaged, so now they only get the hard-core questions. Physicians also feel more rested during the week because they aren’t getting as many calls.”

It was this stress on pediatricians

that caused Alberta Longone-Messer, RNC, ARNP, Nurse Response executive director, to initiate this after-hours call center in 1997.

“I saw what on-call duty was doing to pediatricians and nurse practitioners in terms of burnout and how they had to stay awake through the night. The safety net was very poor,” explains Messer, also a nurse practitioner for the past 20 years.

Nurse Response, based in Hollywood, Florida, is the only nurse-owned community-based call center in the nation and is one of the leading centers in promoting homecare advice. The call center primarily serves Palm Beach, Broward and Miami-Dade counties and is branching out into Orlando and now Jacksonville.

According to Messer, Nurse Response has about 125 subscribing physicians in South Broward and West Palm Beach and about 100 physicians spread out among Jacksonville, Orlando and Miami, serving approximately 500,000 patients.

Nurse Response helps provide a better safety net by giving health coverage 24/7 by a staff composed of 28 nurse practitioners and registered nurses (RNs).

Last year, the Florida call center triaged more than 40,000 calls — over 3,300 calls per month. When a call is placed to any of the four Pediatric Associates offices here in Jacksonville after hours, the call is routed to the triage service center in Hollywood. There an intake specialist asks demographic information and the reason for the call. The caller is then put in contact with either a RN or nurse practitioner, who then asks a series of questions based on algorithms or healthcare guidelines. Nurse Response staff uses a software program based on the nationally renowned Dr. Barton Schmitt pediatric triage protocols. Through a series of questions asked by highly trained professionals, the computer program prioritizes the calls from a high degree of urgency to the lowest and appropriate care advice is given, whether it be to call 911, go to the emergency room, follow up with the patient’s primary care physician the next day or walk the parent through treating the patient at home.

"Behind the computer is the intelligent and experienced nurse," states Messer, noting that her triage nurses have an average of 15 years experience. "She has health-care guidelines in front of her, but the nurse has to be an experienced nurse because sometimes they may need to override the recommendation from the program."

Several Jacksonville parents who use Pediatric Associates say they are extremely happy with the quality of care they received from Nurse Response staff. Rebecca Mercier recently used the after-hours call center when she was caring for a 4-year-old girl while her grandparents were out of the country. The little girl has a history of asthma and was not breathing well.

"I was definitely glad to have this service. The nurse gave me advice on what to do. She calmly walked me through it and didn't rush me like they do when you call the emergency room," Mercier comments.



Medical Assistant Sherri Kemption, with Pediatric Associates of Jacksonville, updates medical information.

"About 40 percent of our nurses are nurse practitioners. We need that experience in the call center..."

— Alberta Longone-Messer, RNC, ARNP,
Nurse Response executive director

Shannon Amerson's 13-year-old daughter had a rash the night before she called Nurse Response and woke up the

next morning covered in hives, having trouble swallowing. "It was comforting because I was freaking out. They calmed me down and told me what to do," says Amerson. "I liked it much better than a traditional answering service where you have to wait for a doctor to call you back."

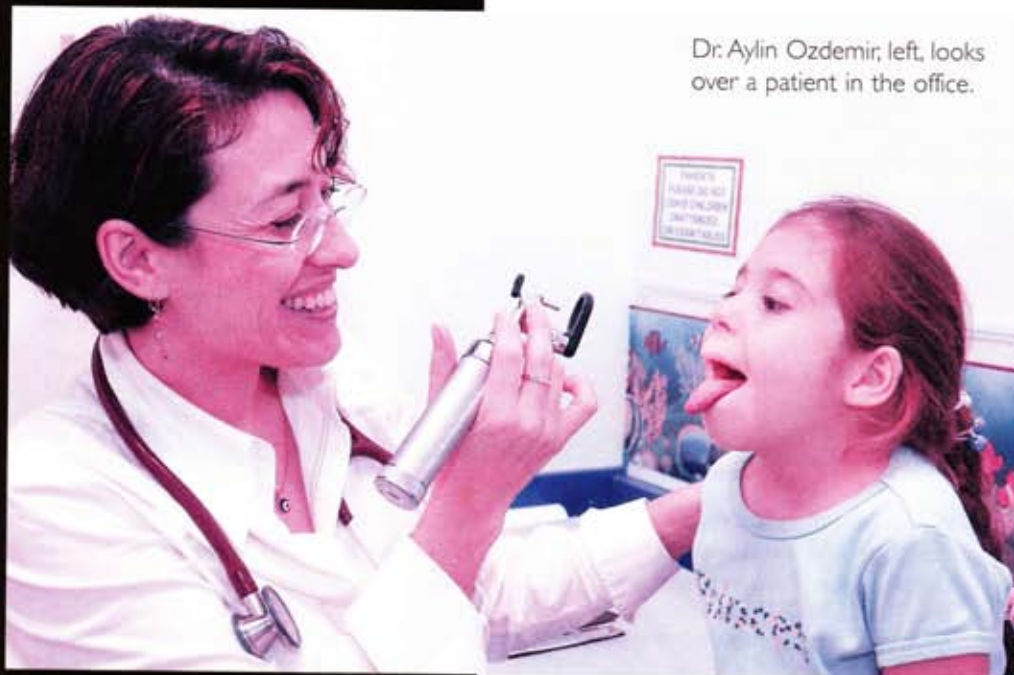
Messer says that parents and physicians can feel confident in turning their children and patients over to their staff.

"About 40 percent of our nurses are nurse practitioners. We need that experience in the call center, and the clinical outcomes really make a difference with that kind of high expertise," she states. "There are a lot of physicians at first that might be reluctant because they're used to talking to their patients. For some patients, they learn after a couple of calls that this is a good place to talk to. They find that the amount of information they're receiving by the nurse is

wonderful."

All medical history is updated every time a parent uses the call center due to the triage of questions that are asked by Nurse Response staff. "There is no way physicians who have 10,000 patients will remember a patient's history, not to the extent of the questions that our nurses are asking. This makes it a very comprehensive set-up," Messer comments.

Dr. Aylin Ozdemir, left, looks over a patient in the office.



Benefits of using an after-hours triage service like Nurse response is that it decreases unnecessary use of emergency rooms ... [and] helps educate patients.

Amerson liked the fact that call center staff asked her a series of questions when she called. "They probe the parents and get more out of us. On-call doctors don't have those questions in front of them and they may forget to ask a question. It may be the one question necessary for your child's case," she says. "With this method of asking questions, it may save parents an emergency room trip or save the kid."

Other benefits of using an after-hours triage service like Nurse Response is that it decreases unnecessary use of emergency rooms, helps educate patients and decreases the number of uninsured/underinsured patients.

"We need to get patients out of the emergency room (ER). You don't need to see runny noses or sore ears in the ER," states Ozdemir. "The patient who doesn't need to go to the ER should be triaged. They should be educated on the phone and taught home care."

Nurse Response refers patients to health education programs and citywide network services as well. For example,

they might refer patients to educational programs on immunization and health screening, hospice, CPR or breastfeeding support.

Continuity of care also continues after hours by Nurse Response sending a report to the physician's office about any of their patients they spoke to during the night or early morning and any recommendations that were given to them.

This report automatically becomes a part of the patient's chart.

"In the past when I was on call, I would write down my recommendations on a pad and put it in the patient's chart. It may be three or four days later when I put this on-call record in an interoffice envelope to send to one of the branch offices," explains Ozdemir. "With Nurse Response, this information is simultaneously faxed to the offices, saving us a lot of paper work."

Subscribing physicians also receive monthly reports showing how many calls were generated on each of a physician's case load and what percentage of patients were sent to the ER, told to see their primary care physician the next day or were treated at home. In addition, physicians receive reports on the types of illnesses their patients were treated for like how many cases were asthma, fever, etc.

Messer believes these reports are crucial to subscribing physicians investing in the program. "We spend a great deal of time in giving quality assurance so that physicians can see a return of investment."

In addition to serving physicians and their practices, Messer says Nurse Response serves primary care clinics that deal with the uninsured and underinsured that otherwise go to the ER for a cut or fever. "This program helps proper utilization of ER services. It puts those children and adults in a hospital ER that need to be there. Those that don't, are given care advice that helps them through the night and redirects them to a provider that will see them the next day."

Costs for such an after-hours call center like Nurse Response isn't cheap. Messer says Nurse Response's program is expensive because it's all computerized. "We're finding out that most nurse call centers and, we in particular, are going

with a per call charge. The charge depends on the call volume, the practice and what labor force we need behind that," she says. "If you have a practice that has only a few calls a month, the cost to them will feel like nothing, but those who have a higher call volume, may be a pretty hefty cost."

As a result, Ozdemir and almost 50 other Jacksonville pediatricians are appealing for funding – more than \$1 million – through grants to help offset costs of the call center program and make it a citywide service. Ozdemir says a community partnership isn't only important because of the money but also for epidemiology study purposes in case there was an outbreak of a particular illness.

"If I have several patients coming in my office with flu-like symptoms, I could ask Nurse Response to run a report to see how many patients are being seen in the city with the same symptoms."

Randy Thornton, M.D., with Jacksonville Pediatrics is among those physicians trying to garner community support.

Thornton, also chief of pediatric medicine at Wolfson Children's Hospital, believes Nurse Response would be a tremendous benefit to the pediatric community and Jacksonville's health system. "It would cut down on visits to the ER, give parents peace of mind and quality of life for pediatricians."

He says his practice is looking into subscribing to the service. His head nurse currently screens the calls after hours and forwards them to four doctors in the practice who rotate on-call duty. "The nature of pediatrics is getting a lot of calls after hours and so many of these things can be handled on the phone," Thornton comments. "It can be tiring coming in the next day after a grueling schedule."

Mary Soha, M.D. of Oceanside Pediatrics and an admitting physician at Wolfson Children's Hospital, also thinks Nurse Response is a great idea. She believes patient education is one major benefit to patients and the community.

"If we can get community backing, all patients will have good solid access to pediatric health information," states Soha. Accurate healthcare triage is another. "If patients are accurately triaged, the ER will not be overflowing and will allow the public greater access to emergency facilities. It will also save a lot

in healthcare dollars because it costs five times more to see a patient in the ER than it does in a doctor's office."

According to Messer, the whole aim of Nurse Response is to see that hospitals, private practices and public health agencies, whether non-profit or profit, partner together. "It's the only way you're going to deliver a program like this, especially if you're looking at healthcare 24/7. This system isn't just good for one practice but good for the community." **H**

Joanna Norris is a Jacksonville-based freelance writer.



- ◆ Is a privately owned, telephone triage service center.
- ◆ Employs more than 23 experienced registered nurses or nurse practitioners.
- ◆ Is available Monday – Friday for after-hour calls from 5 p.m. to 8 a.m. and 24 hours on Saturdays, Sundays and holidays.
- ◆ Is based in Hollywood, Florida.