

# "Find the Passion"

Save to myBoK

by Christina Mayer Duggan

Not many children grow up in doctors' lounges, but as a cardiologist's daughter, Bertine Colombo McKenna did. In fact, McKenna, ART, MBA, PhD, called the hospital "home" and knew healthcare would play a role in her future.

Today she's right at home at Vermont's Fletcher Allen Health Care, putting her professional expertise to work as vice president of managed care operations and president of Vermont Managed Care, its wholly owned PHO subsidiary.

## "A Powerful Tool"

During summer vacations, the Vermont native worked in hospitals' medical records departments. Next, she put her record skills to work at a nursing home, eventually securing her ART via correspondence and consulting at five nursing homes. Even then, McKenna realized the importance of medical records. "I felt the record was a reflection of the patient's care—a powerful tool," she says.

A major turning point in her career came in the early 1980s, however, at New York Infirmary-Beekman Downtown Hospital. As vice president of care coordination, McKenna took on risk management and utilization review. "I realized the record wasn't just paper," she says. "It could make or break the financial impact of a lawsuit, help a doctor remember what happened and what should happen next, or help patients get a bill paid."

McKenna worked at two other East Coast hospitals—as vice president of administration and vice president of operations, respectively—before landing at Fletcher Allen Health Care. For nearly six years, McKenna has performed dual roles at this nonprofit integrated delivery system which serves more than 850,000 people in the state of Vermont and in northeastern New York state.

McKenna realizes HIM professionals must overcome their reputations as merely "records people," and begin viewing themselves as experts providing services to doctors. "Sometimes we don't see this as our role," she says. "This won't change until physicians see us as their partner, the keeper of the most valuable information—their thoughts on why they treated a patient the way they did."

Timeliness of critical information is another concern. "One of the most underplayed issues in healthcare is getting key data from one provider, or place, to the next. If I go home from the hospital Friday and end up in the ER Saturday morning, will the ER doc have the most up-to-date information? That's life and death. That's the power of records."

## Life Outside the Box

Creating a fun atmosphere and sparking creativity in her staff are also challenges, but McKenna rises to the occasion. For instance, Play-Doh once played an integral role in a staff meeting, she says. "We brought Play-Doh in and said, 'Make something, a symbol, that will make your job more efficient,'" she remembers. "One staff member made a computer terminal that represented data she needed to do her job. She was able to express herself in a way she felt was safe."

McKenna also constantly asks, "What can I learn to stay one step ahead?" Along with healthcare-related periodicals and the work of VISA International founder and innovator Dee Hock, she reads *Fast Company*, a "sort of *Harvard Business Review* for the younger business set." The magazine helps her imagine creative ways to respond to consumers.

Using audio education, McKenna immerses herself in compliance issues, legislative developments, and unresolved, pressing legal issues. "It's important to know what's happening in other businesses and learn how to apply it to healthcare," she says.

Since leadership is her passion, McKenna attends the National Managed Healthcare Forum annually and recently completed a negotiation course at Harvard. And while she's been successful over the years, she admits she's still a "work in progress."

She identifies three things that have helped her succeed:

"First, find the passion in your job," she advises. "Second, develop a key skill and sell it. Make sure people know you have the expertise. Offer it whenever you can and help make providers better at their jobs."

Finally, she says, "Listen to people who have gone before and those just coming up. Listen to people who are smart on topics you're not. Learn from each other."

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