

# BUSINESS

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## Economic downturn still presents an upside for these area lawyers



ALLISON CAREY | THE PLAIN DEALER

**Amy Leopard**

Specialty: Health care and bioscience Firm: Walter & Haverfield, partner, practice head

*"My job is to get them through a regulatory minefield without losing a limb."*

**T**he legal industry is like a seesaw. Dealmaking and financing flourish in an up economy.

Bankruptcy and litigation ride high when the economy worsens and people sue each other over broken bargains.

Except for a few blips such as when the dot-com bubble burst, this balance has afforded law firms a 20-year stretch of sustained growth unmatched by almost any U.S. industry.

But the recession that began officially in December 2007 is different.

In today's market, prestigious firms have dissolved. All across the country, lawyers have been laid off — 5,190 from January through July, tracking Website LawShucks.com says. Partners have trimmed associate salaries, stopped hiring new graduates and delayed start dates for those already given offers.

And lawsuits just haven't blossomed the way they usually do in downturns. Aggrieved parties have hung on to their wallets and tried to resolve disputes short of suing.

Even so, the weak economy has shaped up as a boom time for some attorneys.

A 1,000-page proposed health bill and the "reregulation" of America is driving medical industry work, lawyers say.

High-stakes, time-sensitive patent work is keeping intellectual property firms busy. Intensified investigation of financial fraud has white-collar practices going strong. Banks are restructuring loans in a credit-wary environment. And corporate retrenchment has managers seeking layoff guidance and dismissed workers consulting lawyers.

### Health care and bioscience

## Amy Leopard

**Firm:** Walter & Haverfield, partner, practice head

**Education:** Auburn University (public administration), University of Alabama at Birmingham (health services administration), Case West Reserve University School of Law

**Daily life:** Understanding detailed regulatory changes are a big part of Amy Leopard's health law practice. Recently, she was

up to midnight, poring over new rules on the privacy of computerized medical records.

"My husband was laughing at me. I had about 10 different colors going on," Leopard said, referring to her highlighters.

The economic stimulus bill that Congress passed in February appropriated billions to help doctors and hospitals adopt electronic medical records to make the health-care system more efficient. But the push to go paperless heightened worry that your private information could be illicitly accessed with a click of the mouse and spread around the world.

So the most highly regulated industry in the United States, bar none, acquired another layer of safeguards aimed at privacy in the digital age. Some of the provisions take effect in September. Others kick in next February.

The tight deadlines find Leopard, 49, traveling the Midwest advising hospital administrators on compliance.

In the past week she visited two hospitals in Michigan and one in Iowa, meeting with chief financial officers and medical affairs directors. Much of what she does is "preventive counseling," informing hospitals and clinics about encrypting patient records to prevent data breaches, for example.

Leopard's document-intensive job at the 50-attorney Walter & Haverfield also involves a lot of written communication by e-mail. And then there is reading the fine print of the latest rules in the Federal Register, a task that suits the self-professed regulations "geek."

"I like the challenge of figuring out new things," Leopard said, "how to deal with regulatory burdens with the least amount of disruption."

**Path taken:** Leopard was a hospital administrator for 10 years in West Virginia and Alabama before enrolling in law school at age 32. She passed the bar at 35 and was hired at a small Cleveland health law firm, where she worked for several years before joining Walter & Haverfield in 1999. She bills at \$350 to \$400 an hour.

**Advice to someone considering a career in law:** It's a challenging, noble profession. Find a niche and excel at it."

**Personal:** Leopard and her husband Karl Wilkens spent much of the summer playing with their new grandson, AJ. The two lead divorce recovery groups at Rocky River United Methodist Church, with a new workshop starting this fall. Leopard's "therapeutic" pastime is gardening.

**Book on her nightstand:** Carlos Ruiz Zafon, "Shadow of the Wind."