

Paging Dr. Right!

From ditching an existing doctor to seeking a specialist, doc shopping can be daunting. To succeed, patients need resilience, patience, tenacity — and access to a good computer.

By Trudie Mitschang



She came highly recommended. In fact, so many women wanted Dr. “Perfect” to deliver their babies, her waiting room constantly overflowed with anxious mothers-to-be. But whether it was my pregnancy-induced mood swings or some difficult-to-pinpoint personality clash, this popular physician left me cold — and often irritated. I didn’t like her tone of voice, her clammy hands or her rushed treatment style. So, at five months pregnant, I went against the grain and switched doctors — a decision that resulted in some sleepless nights, myriad insurance claims problems and, ultimately, a new OB/GYN whose bedside manner and communication style I loved.

While my story had a positive outcome, switching docs is not always smooth or easy. And for the chronically ill, the whole process can be even more challenging. One rule of thumb for patients to remember as they embark upon a physician search is that they — the patients — are in the driver’s seat. “What I tell folks regarding any doctor is to remember that you are the customer,” says Cathy Chappell Edminster, an *IG Living* reader whose young son has a chronic illness. “That doesn’t mean you can be demanding or unreasonable, but if the doctor or the staff doesn’t treat you with respect or is unwilling to speak in terms you can understand, then speak up. If that doesn’t work, then find a new doctor.”

Knowing Where to Start

There are many reasons people look for a new physician: A relocation, job change or new insurance plan can prompt a move. Certainly a recent diagnosis can be the catalyst for seeking a specialist. In other instances, doctor and patient may simply grow apart; you age, your needs change and it’s time to move on. Whatever the reason, with the right tools and techniques in place, finding a new doctor need not be an exercise in frustration and disappointment.

The first step in searching for a new doctor often involves perusing a printed or online directory of doctors trained in the specialty you seek. If you begin online, these searches can be limited by ZIP code, languages spoken, insurance plans and hospital affiliation. But, according to John Connolly, president of Castle Connolly Medical and former president of the New York Medical College, finding a doctor’s name on a list is only the beginning of a successful search. “The most important thing is to have the attitude of a consumer or a shopper — do not just look on a list or in the phone book,” he says. “Hopefully, a physician is someone you will have a relationship with for years; the better the relationship, the better the care will be.”¹

When choosing a doctor for primary care, Connolly advises patients to be especially diligent, since a good relationship with an experienced primary care physician (PCP) can be a great asset to a patient’s overall health. The PCP is the doctor who will potentially know you the best and perform annual physicals and screenings. This is also the person responsible for writing referrals and coordinating care, which is why a personality or philosophical clash here can be disastrous in the long term. A primary care doctor can also be a medical multi-tasker to help you streamline office visits; many women who have a good working relationship with their PCP often choose to have that doctor act as their gynecologist as well.

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According to Connolly, patients should look for the same things he does when interviewing potential candidates: board certification and ties to a good hospital. Organizations like the American Board of Medical Specialties (abms.org) and the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (jointcommission.org) offer a wealth of information and make great places to start. “Board certification is absolutely critical,” Connolly says. “Without it, you don’t know if the physician has had proper training in that field of specialty.”

This point is important, since many patients don’t realize that current laws allow a licensed physician to put out a shingle for any specialty they choose, even with no specialized training.¹ Board-certified doctors, on the other hand, have been trained in a specific specialty and have undergone additional schooling. For patients with special healthcare needs, such as a chronic illness, the ABMS can be an invaluable resource for finding qualified care.

The other thing to look for when analyzing a potential doctor’s qualifications is their hospital affiliation. Access to a reputable hospital is essential when faced with a serious illness or emergency. Connolly says some patients have even been known to choose a hospital first, then a doctor, based on factors like proximity and reputation.



Speed Dating for Doctors

Imagine the following classified ad: "CIP (chronically ill patient) seeks Doc. Must be a compassionate listener with exceptional bedside manner. Stellar credentials required. Only seasoned professionals need reply."

Sound crazy? The fact is, more and more patients are shopping for doctors the way some might seek a long-term relationship. And for those with chronic disease, the stakes can be even higher than for those seeking a marriage commitment. For many, breaking up with a doctor can be messy, painful and even detrimental to their health, which is why so many patients stay with providers with whom they are dissatisfied. Perhaps a hypothetical website like "Match MD" is an idea whose time has come. For a few hospitals in Texas, it's a concept with merit.

In March 2011, Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital hosted the first in a series of "Doc Shop" evenings as a way to allow potential patients to find the doctor that best fits their needs. The event was set up like a speed dating event. Doctors from the community gathered in a room and prospective patients had about three minutes to have a face-to-face conversation with them one at a time. When a buzzer went off, the participants rotated to the next doctor.²

Texas Health Presbyterian is not the first hospital in the country to bring dating techniques into the medical setting. Texas Health Harris Methodist Hospital Hurst-Euless-Bedford (HEB) has hosted similar events since September 2009. According to Mandy Forbus, senior

marketing specialist for Texas Health HEB, Doc Shop was originally geared toward women to help them meet and interview OB/GYNs. But the concept is catching on and can be applicable to anyone seeking a new healthcare provider. "It's so impersonal to pick a healthcare provider at random off your insurance company's list or based off a friend's referral, only to show up and wish you'd been able to pick a doctor who better suited your personality needs," Forbus said in a press release about the event. "With a Doc Shop, it allows potential patients to meet with potential physicians so they can pick the best match. If you like your doctor, you're more likely to make/keep appointments and take better care of yourself and your family. Plus, feeling comfortable enough to ask difficult or personal questions only strengthens the patient-physician relationship, which could span a lifetime. Overall, it is a win-win for community members and physicians."

A Look at Doctor Rating Systems

We review movies, restaurants and consumer goods online, so the reasoning goes, why not doctors? A growing number of websites offer rating systems and reviews for doctors, a trend many physicians are uncomfortable with.

In an article that appeared in *USA Today*, Nancy Nielson, past president of the American Medical Association (AMA), notes that while doctors care what patients think, anonymous online ratings and rants can ruin reputations and destroy trust. But, the creators of such sites defend their content, saying access to reviews and other rating criteria is helpful and even essential. With so many sites popping up, it's easy for patients to find out almost everything about a physician's credentials and personality quirks without ever scheduling an office consultation.³

Popular rating sites like Vitals.com include details on training, experience, certification and disciplinary history, along with patient satisfaction ratings. At HealthGrades.com, consumer ratings (on factors ranging from office cleanliness to a physician's listening skills) are used to compile ratings, and unlike some sites, HealthGrades does not include free-form comments. Plus, physicians can pay a fee to edit their profiles and upload video files. Another site, RateMDs.com, offers a top-10 list of doctors by specialty and ZIP code for at-a-glance research. And DrScore.com allows patients to input satisfaction ratings for their own doctor and search the site for ratings of other physicians. Physicians can view summaries of their ratings through the site, or receive more detailed reports that allow them to potentially respond to criticism and improve service.

Still, critics say the very nature of a ratings website brings out the disgruntled and dissatisfied, creating a somewhat biased platform. Most of the major review sites respond to that concern by stressing that their sites are careful to block multiple negative (or positive) postings from the same source. And, they say, the bottom line is that we live in an age in which consumers seek information from many different sources before making major decisions. The sites just make relevant facts and opinions more accessible.

Meeting a Match

What happens after compiling a short list of potential physicians? The next step, experts say, is to schedule a consultation and come armed with questions that can help patients make an informed decision.

The AMA stresses that, like any relationship, the one between doctor and patient is based on open communication. In the guide *Choosing Your Physician*, the AMA advises that it is the right of the patient to request information on a doctor's training and to even ask seemingly personal questions, like the physician's feelings on issues such as living wills and patient confidentiality.⁴

Personality counts, too, and that's where online ratings and reviews can't help; that's why a face-to-face meeting is so important. Other factors to consider are whether the doctor has evening and weekend hours, whether the office accepts same-day appointments for urgent care, whether waiting times are reasonable and whether the doctor is a sole practitioner or part of a group practice. The bottom line, of course, is whether the patient feels comfortable with the doctor they have selected; only they know if it's a good fit. "People need to find a doctor who sees the relationship as a partnership. This means the doctor has to be a good listener and has to be willing to consider treatment options that you suggest and experiment with different approaches to your illness," says Toni Bernhard, author of *How to Be Sick: A Buddhist-Inspired Guide for the Chronically Ill and Their Caregivers*. "The doctor also has to be comfortable working with a patient that he or she may not be able to 'fix.' I wish they taught prospective doctors in medical school that they need not feel they have to have all the answers, because some medical problems can't be cleared up by just writing a prescription."

Bernhard, who lives with chronic illness, is an advocate for patient empowerment, and she believes patient satisfaction should be prioritized when it comes to selecting a physician: "If your doctor isn't willing to work with you and instead just insists that you do whatever he or she

tells you to do, I'd find another doctor."

In an excerpt from her book *The Empowered Patient*, senior medical correspondent for CNN's Health, Medical and Wellness unit Elizabeth Cohen stresses that it is imperative to find a practitioner who takes you and your health problems seriously. Cohen's mother is in end-stage kidney failure today because an internist misdiagnosed her symptoms

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and refused to order the blood tests that would have identified adrenal problems. He told her the symptoms she described were due to stress, and that she simply needed to "slow down."⁵ The experience prompted Cohen to become a patient advocate, and her book offers specific guidelines for finding the illusive "Dr. Right."

"Dr. Right won't attribute your problems to being 'all in your head,'" she says. "Dr. Right won't tell you that if you 'just relax' your symptoms will go away. If my mother had found Dr. Right from the very beginning, things probably would have turned out very differently. The lesson to learn from my mother's experience is that a doctor who blames you for your illness is Dr. Wrong." ■

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