

On Building Doctor-Patient Relationships

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Sometimes it seems that you can't get away from it. Anyone who picks up a magazine or newspaper -- whether its AARP's *Bulletin*, *Glamour*, *Redbook*, *Consumers' Research Magazine*, or the *New York Times* -- will likely find at least one article telling patients how to get more out of healthcare and doctors.

And this is good. As patients, we've come a long way from the days when we thought we should not question doctors because only they knew best. We now know that "knowing best" often comes when doctors and patients put their heads together, sharing what each knows. We now know that, with clear explanations about our medical condition and treatment options, we can learn enough to help us decide what to do. And, assuming our condition allows us to think straight, we also now know that we have a right to participate in making those decisions. Finally, we now know from research that we're more likely to have better health outcomes when we do participate.

So, as patients, we have much to gain by reading articles that tell us what is reasonable to expect, and how to get what we expect, from our doctors. It's the "how", though, that is especially important. If we think of ourselves as consumers who, in paying doctors for their services, can demand what we want and find someone else if we don't get it, then we may not be taking full advantage of what doctors have to offer us -- not if we automatically leave without first talking with them about why we want something and they don't.

As patients, we *should* speak up, and even disagree, with doctors if their "take" on the situation doesn't gel with ours or if, for instance, we know that we're not likely to follow the treatment plan they've prescribed. What's called for, though, is that we negotiate with them, rather than automatically say (or think): "give me what I want or I'll find another doctor who will." Why? Because what doctors know is important and that's often the whole reason we go to them in the first place. Because finding a new doctor is always an option, but finding one that gives us what we want, just because we want it, may not be in our best interests.

So where does that leave patients? Well, think about it. A good doctor-patient relationship, like any relationship, doesn't just happen. It needs to be worked on. People in relationships need to get to know each other and, by working through difficult situations, learn *how* to work *with* one another. Sometimes we know, early on, that building a relationship will be impossible but, generally, it's to our advantage to try to build one before moving on to another doctor.

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