

## Doctors and Communication

by Dr. Fred Raleigh, Plus Magazine, April, 2006

**Question:** Just for your information I am a member of a large HMO Medical Insurance Plan.

Lately, it seems to me that when I go to the doctor's office things often happen in a blur. Not only is the whole appointment kind of a bang-bang thing and there are many times that I walk away shaking my head, because I simply have not understood what my doctor has told me.

What can I do to get things to slow down during those rare, but necessary times when I have a problem that requires the attention of a physician?

CD Templeton, CA

**Answer:** What you have raised in your letter is a common phenomena experienced by many patients.

First of all, you should not feel like this is just your perception or problem. The fact is you are not alone in your concern. Close to half of the adults in this country share your concerns.

In *Consumers Report On Health* (November 2004) a story detailing an April 2004 study that was conducted by the national Institute of Medicine indicated that close to 90 million adult Americans – nearly half the population – have a difficult time understanding the health information they receive from their doctors.

The article goes on to elaborate about numerous communication studies that show physicians only allowed patients adequate time to address their concerns in less than 10% of the visits. One study even taped all encounters and analyzed the tapes. The up shot of this report is that in many, but fortunately not all cases, doctors do not regard communication as a two way street. This may be why close to half of our adult population feels that we do not fully understand the health information provided to us by our physicians. Another factor to consider is that the words used by physicians are unique to the field and for many foreign.

Interestingly this perception of poor communication can lead to poor outcomes. In a 1995 Consumer Report survey involving over 70,000 readers and that examined the doctor-patient relationship, it was found that patients whose physicians had encouraged questions, solicited opinions and explained recommendations were more likely to say their condition had improved. Ideally getting to know your patient seems to be the best approach for improving health care if one is to believe the results of this study.

Yet, in today's rushed medical settings lasting bonds and good doctor-patient relationships are not easy to obtain. Many physicians feel like you do in that the rules of the insurance companies and HMOs have set standards that may be geared more for profits than good patient care.

There are ways to help alleviate the conditions described above and I have listed some of them below. It is wise to remember doctors are busy and you should try to let them know at the start of the appointment what your questions are vs. at the end of the appointment when the doctor may already be thinking about their next patient.

First, you might want to begin your appointment with the following: “Doctor here are some things that I thought you might need to know about me.”

Second, make a short list of your concerns and questions and let the doctor know at the start of the appointment that you have some questions and concerns to go over with them before you finish the appointment. You may even want to check with the doctor’s office about faxing in your questions before hand.

Third, be persistent and don’t give up. After all the doctor is your employee and not the other way around. Granted you are the patient but without you there is no HMO.

Fourth, try to make the conversation a two way one with give and take involved. Remember earlier on how one study showed that the more the patient knew and understood the better they thought their condition was doing.

Fifth, do your homework. Go to the library or go on the Internet and research your questions. The more knowledgeable you are the better you will be able to follow instructions, understand the reason for the medication’s use and other related healthcare matters. I would advise you not to take a ream of printed material into the doctor’s office to support your position.

Sixth, do not be afraid to speak up. And of course, take a small pad and pen with you to the visit so you can take notes. Studies have shown that half of what the doctor tells their patient will be forgotten within a short time after the patient leaves the office.

Though the above is just a sampling of things you can do - all will help to reduce your concerns.

Other things you can do is to describe your symptoms in the fashion of a time line. Tell the doctor everything in a succinct fashion to help with the diagnostic procedures. Leaving out bits of information that you feel are unimportant may throw off the doctor's ability to accurately diagnosis your condition.

In addition, to all that has already been said it is wise to ask more and not less questions. For example when certain procedures and/or tests are mentioned you might want to ask things like what are the downsides of these tests or procedures, is there discomfort before or after the test and should I bring someone to drive me home? Other questions might center on time issues like when is the best time to take this medication or to show up for the procedure or take the test.

Though I cannot provide you with all the information that is available on how to improve your personal relationship with your physician I hope that I have given you a small start.

Finally, I would like to make a few comments about medications that may be prescribed for you.

The Institute of Medicine estimates that close to 10% of all adverse drug events happen simply because of poor doctor-patient communications. Before leaving the office you will want to know the purpose of the medication; is it available in a generic form; are there any significant

drug interactions you should know about; and lastly, if there are cost concerns is there a different or generic product that would be as effective yet less costly.

If your doctor is too busy to answer these questions to your liking I would suggest that you ask your local pharmacist and do not leave the pharmacy until you feel comfortable.

Communication does not necessarily end with the office visit. If something comes up you might want to call into the doctor's office and let him/her know. Now-a-days doctors have e-mail and may encourage you to forward your questions via this medium. It certainly does not hurt to ask.

In closing I have listed below just one of my favorite Internet sites that has a tremendous wealth of easy to access health information that you might find useful.

Merck Manual of Health Information: [www.merck.com/mrkshared/mmanual\\_home2/home.jsp](http://www.merck.com/mrkshared/mmanual_home2/home.jsp)