

Finding a Partner in Your Healthcare: Working Effectively With Healthcare Professionals

In years past our health was seen as someone else's responsibility. Many of us delegated this to our physician, or to other health care professionals. We expected miracles from the medical profession. Ken Pelletier, in his book, *Holistic Medicine*, referred to this as the Volkswagen concept of health care. The main idea being that like a Volkswagen of the 60's and the 70's, we could drive it hard and when it broke down, we could simply take it into the shop and repair it, e.g., put another engine in it. Unfortunately many of us have treated our bodies like a Volkswagen. Unlike the Volkswagen, however, we wear out and often cannot be repaired, even with the miracles of modern medicine. In the health care system of the 21st century, the patient will have to take a much more active role. The prevention of disease and disability will have to be taken seriously both by the health care profession and the patient. Many of the factors driving this are economic. The miracles of modern medicine are expensive and often not cost effective. If the past holds true for the future, most of the money you will spend on your health, will be spent on caring for you during your last week of life. Not a very positive outcome.

So what can you do? Take responsibility for taking care of yourself and for managing your health. See your physician and other health care professionals as working for you, as consultants who are there to help you care for yourself. In general, health care professionals are well paid for the services that they provide, specifically physicians. Treat them with respect, but demand that they treat you with respect.

Before you visit a health care professional, prepare a list of the questions that you wish to ask. Think about what you want to get out of this visit to the doctor. Make notes about the symptoms, what they consist of, when they started, how long they've lasted, what treatments you have already tried, and what you believe might be causing the problem. Be sure to bring a list of all the medications that you are presently taking and any medical records or test results that might be relevant. You may want to rehearse your questions before you meet the doctor.

As with most interactions with others, the first few minutes are the most important. Present your concerns first. The average primary care physician has about seven minutes to spend with you. Therefore, be specific, concise, and honest.

Involve yourself actively in the decision making process. Ask questions. For example, ask the physician what he or she would do if you were a member of their family. What would they recommend? If the physician gives you specific instructions ask that these be written down. Before you leave the office make sure you understand what the physician's diagnosis is, what they expect the outcome of the problem to be, and what they are recommending for treatment and follow-up. Do not be afraid to ask for a second opinion or to call back and ask to speak with the physician if after leaving the office you are unclear about what was recommended and what you are to do. Be sure you understand when you will get feedback on medical tests and when you should see the physician again. Let your physician know whether you are satisfied with the care that you received. Health care professionals like everyone else, like compliments and positive comments. If you are unhappy with the services and cannot resolve the problems with the health care professional, do not be afraid to "fire them" and seek other help. In most areas of this country, especially in larger cities, there is no shortage of physicians or other health care professionals who are willing to treat you on an outpatient basis. For more information on this issue you may want to refer to David Sobel and Robert Ornstein's book, *The Healthy Mind, Healthy Body*

Handbook. It is an excellent reference on a variety of issues such as staying well, boosting immunity, managing illness, and reducing health care costs.