



Tips for Navigating Healthcare's New Terrain

With some preparation and a little knowledge of what happens behind the scenes, it's still possible to get quality healthcare during doctor visits.

By Carsten Schmiedl

He may have been exaggerating, but a family friend, an experienced and respected doctor, recently told me something shocking: If we were living before the year 1900 and became sick, there was a better chance at a positive medical outcome by staying home rather than going to see the doctor. While I have yet to verify his claim, the gist of it — that healthcare has improved that much over such a relatively short period of time — gave me some perspective on today's ongoing debates about healthcare reform. It was a reminder that, while we live in a time when the healthcare system is routinely criticized, it has been so much worse.

Still, there's surely something to the ongoing debate on healthcare currently dominating mainstream news outlets across the country. The use of buzzwords such as "Obamacare," "Affordable Care Act" and, more generally, "healthcare reform" has become routine. We're often inundated with arguments for and against it. Cautious optimists think that its benefits will outweigh its growing pains. The other side contends that the system is destined to implode, and must be rebuilt in a few years anyway. It seems the only reasonable conclusion we can glean from this debate is that the current system cannot remain the same. But, perhaps the most frustrating part is trying to grasp the practical implications — namely, how doctor visits themselves will be affected.

With healthcare's ever-changing terrain, patients need some practical advice on how to navigate the system, including some background information to understand what goes on behind the scenes in healthcare, as well as some simple steps to make doctor visits more worthwhile.

Behind the Scenes of Healthcare

What many people don't realize is that changes in healthcare are already underway — whether subtle, obvious or hidden entirely. An obvious sign of the changes in healthcare, visible across the country, is the increasing presence of electronic medical records (EMRs). EMRs simplify healthcare on many levels for doctors. From a practical perspective, for example, they aim to eliminate much of the busywork innate in having paper-only charts. They also reduce the chance of losing papers from charts or rendering any of its pages unreadable.

Further, EMRs are indispensable to the success of healthcare reform. Information registries, for example, will hopefully make it easier for researchers to gather information en masse about the quality of healthcare. Some EMR systems have built-in features allowing providers to easily export information about patients to outside registries, where the information is analyzed and passed on to decision-makers. The hope is that the data entered in these registries will help identify effective treatment plans. The downside is that some "researchers" who may gain access to registry data are employed by insurance companies that use this data to determine whether doctors meet their companies' standards of care, oftentimes limiting the amount of tests doctors can perform to assist them in providing quality medical care.

In addition to the research opportunities these information registries provide, patients should be aware of how their

information is shared. We're all familiar with Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) regulations and the idea of doctor-patient confidentiality — namely, that the personal health information shared with doctors is protected. Providers, however, are increasingly under pressure to submit information about their patients to these registries. And, as part of their contract with insurance companies, providers must produce patient charts whenever insurance companies request them. I can attest that these insurance audits happen frequently. While these third parties have policies in place to protect patient privacy, there is a risk because patient information is more vulnerable every time it leaves the clinic.

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Unfortunately, there is a more obvious consequence of EMRs: less patient-doctor eye contact. While this may seem insignificant, patient-doctor communication is where healthcare is truly delivered. With paper charts, there were fewer obstacles. Clinic notes were less structured, and there was less information to input. But with EMRS, even for routine visits today, doctors must now ensure that everything is filled out. These are requirements that can hinder the art of medicine. Ironically, I've heard chief surgeons complain that their residents' chart notes are becoming less individualized and more standardized; because of stricter documentation requirements, the residents template almost all information, and include less information about the patient. Whether patient outcomes are ultimately improved remains to be seen. But for now, they clearly come at the cost of lengthier patient-doctor interactions.

The documentation requirements of EMRs have also resulted in an expansion of the healthcare team. Clinics now must include a technical support team to ensure that they run smoothly. Of course, this comes at additional cost.

The common thread seems to be that efforts to improve quality of care appear to demand less medical work and

more administrative work from healthcare providers. In October 2013, Harvard Medical School economist Dr. Michael Chernew began a study to measure the effectiveness of these quality control measures.

Steps to Make Doctor Visits Successful

The good news is that great healthcare is still possible in today's healthcare climate. And, having an understanding of what goes on behind the scenes, before and after the visit, goes a long way toward making clinic visits more satisfying. The patient-doctor relationship is, after all, a two-way street. For a visit to be successful, it requires that both sides play their roles effectively. Just as your doctor wants to know your story, knowing about the current state of healthcare creates more trust and more effective communication.

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Time is at a premium in today's medical clinics, perhaps more than ever — especially considering the impending influx of citizens into the healthcare system and the shortage of doctors that is sure to result. So, something as simple as coming to clinic visits prepared and with reasonable expectations goes a long way. A great first step is for patients to know specifically what they would like to accomplish during their visit and be able to explain it in a concise manner. On one of the forms in our clinic, we have a small line on which patients write their "chief complaint." This is the main problem that the doctor will address during the visit. There's nothing doctors dread hearing more at the end of a visit, when their hand is on the doorknob, than "Doctor, I have another question."

There are several other ways patients can make their visit more successful. Writing down questions beforehand can help patients organize their thoughts and will help them leave their visit satisfied. Stating their priority at the beginning of the visit ensures that there's adequate time to address their concerns. No one likes waiting, but the

new documentation guidelines are causing delays in the room and for the medical clinic. So patients should bring their smartphone, laptop or book with them to make their wait more enjoyable and productive. If they prefer to reschedule because they cannot wait, they should never be afraid to do so. The more at ease they are during their visit, the better.

Finally, selecting the right provider can be almost as important as the visit itself. But how do patients know who is right for them? There's no single method because medicine is not your average consumer-based industry. Put simply, patients' health is at risk. The best resources are the ones with expertise. Personal references, such as people the patients know who recommend a provider, may be a good place to start. Patients' primary care providers are also a great resource, not only because they know the patients, but because they have medical expertise. There are also certain medical societies, or sub-specialty colleges such as the Immune Deficiency Foundation and the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology that can recommend specialists in patients' areas.

And, patients need to be aware of the limitations of online reviews. While they tell the opinions of a small group of people, most reviewers do not have medical expertise and often have a hidden agenda. Review websites have their own agendas as well. They often recycle reviews off of other websites to generate traffic. At the same time, they attempt to entice providers to sign up for services to remove bad reviews. These services are not free, and one major review site that advertised to our clinic charges hundreds of dollars per month to "clean up reputations" diminished by bad reviews. This certainly suggests a conflict of interest.

Still Bedside Medicine

Despite ongoing healthcare changes, medicine is still practiced at the bedside, between patients and their providers. Doctors are highly trained professionals. They are entrusted with taking care of the sick and are often required to make judgment calls when the choices are not obvious. There's a certain artistic quality to medicine that I believe motivates many providers every day. By choosing the right provider and spending their time wisely, patients will be on their way to receiving excellent healthcare, even as healthcare changes swirl around them. ■

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