



# Choosing the Right Physician

*Choosing the physician that meets your needs is one of the most important decisions you will make.*

*Here are some things to consider when making that decision.*

## **Getting yourself started**

Choosing the right doctor is a very important decision. The first step is deciding what type of doctor you need...a primary care physician, family practitioner, pediatrician or obstetrician/gynecologist. Below are some guidelines to follow when choosing a physician:

- ◆ Ask friends and relatives for recommendations.
- ◆ If you are moving and changing physicians ask your current physician if he or she can refer you to someone in your new community or check with area hospitals. Many of them offer referral services.
- ◆ Check with your county medical society. They will give you the names of several physicians.
- ◆ Ask your insurance company, health maintenance organization or managed care plan if they have a panel of physicians from which you should select.

## **Deciding what you want or need from your Doctor**

### **What is their experience?**

Does the doctor have the experience to deal with your condition(s)? Are they part of a group that may contain a "specialist" for your needs? Research shows that doctors who have a lot of experience with a condition tend to have better success with treating it.

### **Which hospitals is the physician affiliated with?**

Find out at which hospitals the physician has admitting privileges. This can be very important to know in times of medical emergencies.

### **Do they participate in your health plan?**

If the doctor you choose does not participate in your health plan, you may have to pay "out of pocket" for your visits.

## **Background and Credentials?**

### **Is the physician licensed?**

To find out if the physician is currently licensed and registered in New York State, call the State Education Department at 518-474-3817 or access the department's

web site at [www.nysed.gov](http://www.nysed.gov).

### **Are they board-certified?**

Many doctors become board certified in a specialty. This means that they complete specialty training and pass formal examinations. While no guarantee of excellence, board certification is one way the average consumer can be certain of a physician's training. Many primary care physicians also are board-certified in specialty areas.

*The Directory of Physicians in the United States, the Medical Directory of New York State and The Directory Of Board-Certified Medical Specialists* list qualifications of individual physicians. They include where the physician attended medical school and received residency training, board certification; hospital affiliations; type of practice; and other information. These books can be found in the reference sections of most libraries. You may also call the American Board of Medical Specialties to confirm if a physician is board-certified and to get the number of individual specialty boards. The Board can be reached at 1-800-776-2378.

### **Has the physician been disciplined?**

To learn if a physician has been disciplined, call OPMC at 1-800-663-6114. Or, access the medical conduct web site at [www.health.state.ny.us](http://www.health.state.ny.us) and select "information for consumers." Only final disciplinary actions are provided. Pending or dismissed complaints are not public information.

## **General Practice and Procedures**

**Location, location, location:** This alone could be the deciding factor for your choice of a physician. Are they close to your home? Could you get there in a reasonable amount of time in case of an emergency?

**Office hours:** What are the office hours? How can they be contacted after hours or for emergency situations? Does the physician make house calls? What are the name(s) and location(s) of the physician(s) that will cover for my doctor when they are not available?

**Are they currently expecting new patients?** The answer to this question will determine whether you can consider using this physician.

**Language:** Does the doctor or someone in their office staff speak the language that you are most comfortable speaking?

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**Appointments:** How far in advance do you need to call for a yearly exam? What is the expected notification for a cancelled appointment? Will you still have to pay for the appointment?

**Payment requirements:** Does the physician expect payment at time of service or can you be billed? What insurance do they accept, and does this include Medicare? Is there a fee for cancelling an appointment? Will you have to process your own insurance claims?

## Getting Personal

**How do you feel about involving a patient's family in decision making?**

Will the physician take time to explain your condition and keep your family informed of any developments? It is important that you tell your physician exactly how you feel about family involvement.

**Do you believe that whatever a patient tells you is confidential?**

Patient-physician confidentiality is a tradition within the medical profession. However, there may be times when a physician is required to report information to the government, such as an outbreak of measles.

**Do you always get patient permission before releasing records?**

A physician normally will not release your records unless you have already given general consent, such as when: you want another physician to look at your records; your primary care physician is consulting another physician; your insurance company has requested it; you are checking into a clinic or hospital; or you have a medical emergency.

**How would you feel if I sought a second opinion on your diagnosis or recommended therapy?**

As a patient, you have the right to seek a second opinion whenever you feel one is necessary.

**Besides my medical history and current health, what would you want to know about me?**

Your physician should want to know as much about you as possible. Details of your personal life can be an important aspect of your overall health and well being.

## The Office Visit

The office staff should be calm, polite and friendly, and the atmosphere should be clean and comfortable.

When scheduling an appointment, ask for help in choosing a time when waiting will be minimal. Ask how much time to allow.

Remember that you are entitled to a full explanation of any diagnosis, medication, test, treatment, and charges. Keep asking until you fully understand any unfamiliar medical language. Write down your diagnosis, and feel free to ask for any further explanations, pictures, or written material. Find out how long this condition will affect you. Are there any lifestyle or habit changes that might help? What effect will treatment have? Try using your own words to explain your condition back to your doctor, as you understand it.

If tests are ordered, ask about the purpose, risks, costs, and effects of each test. When will you learn the results of the test? Is there another way to obtain the same information?

Regarding medication, be sure to inform your physician of all prescription and over-the-counter drugs (including vitamins) you are taking. Ask about the type of relief to expect, and when to expect it. In what manner are you to take the drug, and for how long? Be sure to ask about side effects, and carefully monitor any and all effects the drug has.

Remember, there is nothing wrong with asking questions or bringing a list of concerns with you to your physician's office.

*Medical Society of the County of Erie*

*"Better Health Through Advocacy"™  
"If Not You... Who?"™*



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