

You and Your Primary Care Physician:
Optimizing the Doctor Patient Relationship
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The health care industry today is brutally cost conscious and efficiency driven. Physicians are expected to see ever increasing numbers of patients in shorter periods of time. Skyrocketing malpractice premiums are forcing physicians to practice extremely defensive medicine in an increasingly litigious society. Insurance companies insist that primary care physicians act as ruthless "gatekeepers". The old fashioned trusting doctor patient relationship is often hard to recreate in today's busy world, both for the physician and the patient. The patient has to play a critical role in ensuring they get the care they deserve.

As a Pediatrician who has practiced in a variety of settings including a managed care organization, these are some of my observations that seem to enable an improved doctor patient relationship. While some suggestions are Pediatric specific, they are most applicable across the board to other medical specialties and other ancillary services.

The 4 major categories, where patients can become be proactive, seem to be the following:

FRONT OFFICE AND SCHEDULING:

☺ A **new patient** to a doctor's office will always be required to fill out **paperwork** at your first visit. This includes demographic and contact information (address, phone number, alternate contacts with phone numbers, employer's information, dentist's information, referring source etc) and insurance information as well as your health history. It's often easier to find this information at home than in a doctor's waiting room.

☺ Ask the office to **mail** you the form when you make the appointment so you have the information ready when you walk in. This saves you the trouble of having to be 15-20 minutes early for your doctor's visit, and gives their office a chance to verify your insurance information ahead of time and call you with questions if needed. Your Physician's office will **really** appreciate this extra courtesy especially when you have more than one child coming in for the first time!

☺ Try and have health **records transferred** to your new doctor in advance if possible. If not, be sure to sign the release of information form at the first visit.

☺ Family Practice and Pediatric offices are usually swamped with **kindergarten and sports physicals** in July and August. The kindergarten shots can actually be given any time after a child turns 4, so it's wise to plan ahead of time and **avoid the last minute scramble**.

☺ Most insurance plans will only allow **one physical in a calendar year**. If your child plans to participate in a sport that requires a medical examination, be sure you plan for that appropriately. Trying to arrange for an appointment at 3 PM the day prior to tryouts is often an exercise in futility. **Your tardiness may not constitute an emergency for your physician!**

When scheduling appointments, keep these tips in mind:

- ☺ Avoid times where you are likely to be late.
- ☺ Do call if you are running late or have to cancel so your slot can be used for another patient!
- ☺ Don't schedule one child and add a sibling(s) at the front desk.
- ☺ Try to be as candid with the front desk as possible so that they can schedule you an appointment that best fits your needs. Normal visits are about 10-15 minutes. If you think you want more time, you can to ask in advance as the Physician may be trying to get to the next patient and you may feel your questions are not being answered.
- ☺ You may wait longer than usual during busy seasons, such as winter. So plan accordingly to avoid frustration.
- ☺ Try to bring an interpreter with you if English is not your primary language. Do not depend on an older child to translate for you.
- ☺ Avoid making every illness an emergency. This ensures that the office will do their utmost to accommodate you when you DO have an emergency.
- ☺ Show your appreciation by a simple letter or note of thanks when the office does a good job.

INSURANCE ISSUES:

- ☺ Be sure you bring your current insurance card each time.
- ☺ Understand what is covered by your particular insurance plan. Each employer can negotiate a different contract with the same insurance company and the physician will not know the details of each such contract.
- ☺ Doctors have no control over the covered benefits provided by an insurance plan. You are responsible for any amount that is not covered by your insurance.
- ☺ You can make informed and educated choices regarding medications, and treatment options if you understand what is covered by your insurance plan. Doing your homework helps!
- ☺ Co-payment and/or co-insurance often cover a substantial part of the reimbursement to the Doctor. This is the reason why doctor's offices insist that co-payment be made at the time of service as the insurance company will not reimburse the physician if co-payment is not collected. Increasingly, many Doctors' offices are required by their contracts to turn away patients if co-payment is not rendered at the time of service.
- ☺ Insurance plans often impose rules and restrictions such as preauthorization for certain tests, submission of claims within a specified period, going to a specified lab or pharmacy etc. Be sure you read the fine print and, when in doubt, call the insurance company BEFORE you make the appointment.
- ☺ There are situations where you may disagree with the insurance company. You DO have rights and avenues to appeal. Make sure that you are aware of them and don't hesitate to use them when necessary. Your physician may be able to champion your cause with the insurance company.
- ☺ Other sources like governmental agencies, support groups and non profit organizations may be able to help you with insurance issues.
- ☺ Insurance companies, like other service providers, have employee turnover. Their representatives may not be very knowledgeable or

experienced. Be sure you keep a record of your conversations and emails and take the matter to a supervisor if necessary.

☺ When switching insurances plans or companies, be sure you can continue with the same physician(s) and the new plan or company will cover pre existing medical conditions. It's always the fine print that matters! Read it carefully!

PHARMACY AND MEDICATION ISSUES:

☺ Be sure you bring your pharmacy address/phone number for the chart.

☺ Medication allergies should be clearly stated at the outset. Avoid saying "It was some pink medicine and I think it gave me a rash." Your child's health and safety can crucially depend on you remembering these specifics.

☺ Remember the names and dosages of medications you are taking. You may want to bring the medication bottles with you to remember the details.

☺ Certain prescriptions can only be refilled a month at a time. Allow your physician's office the courtesy of a 48 hour notice when needing a refill. Calling at 4 PM on a Friday evening when you have run out of a required daily medication is unwise, unproductive and frustrating.

☺ Many insurance plans have "tiered" coverage of medications and the higher tier medications usually cost more to the patient. The actual patient cost for a given medication varies widely by insurance plan.

☺ Ask your doctor if you can have a generic medication, which is usually cheaper than a brand name drug.

☺ Check to see if the insurance has a preferred formulary (list) of drugs rather than being caught unawares at the pharmacy.

☺ Your insurance plan may allow or even insist that you get a mail-in 3 month supply of medications at a lower cost. Be sure you mention this to your doctor.

☺ You may see commercials for drugs and request your doctor for the same. Newly released medications are usually expensive, have no generic versions, and are slow to get covered by insurance plans. Your physician has to decide if they are appropriate for you when you discuss it with him. Merely because it is advertised in your favorite magazine or TV show does not automatically make it right for you.

☺ Under rare circumstances, determined by the physician, he/she may be able to write a "special drug request" to obtain a medication that is normally not covered by a given insurance plan.

PHYSICIAN ISSUES:

☺ Always bring your child's immunization records with you. They are as important as your driver's license! Shots are often given even if an appointment is scheduled for an unrelated issue, and it's better to be documented immediately on the child's shot record.

☺ Remember to bring sports physical forms, forms for medications to be given at school, etc when you come to the office.

☺ When requesting FMLA (Family Medical Leave Act) or other such paperwork, please allow the doctor some time for it to be completed.

☺ Don't schedule one child and add a sibling(s) at the front desk.

☺ Don't ask your Pediatrician to "take a peek" at other children for whom appointments were not scheduled in the first place. It is not fair to other patients in the waiting room who have made appointments.

- ☺ Don't ask "curbside" questions about other children who are currently not in the office. Your physician may not be able to recall detailed information accurately on the spur of the moment and it places her in an awkward position.
- ☺ Avoid making an appointment for one problem and bring up a laundry list of issues when the doctor walks into or out of the room.
- ☺ Make a few summary notes if you have a complex or long standing medical problem to discuss with the doctor. This saves you time in recounting the history and gives the physician greater opportunity to examine and discuss treatment options with you.
- ☺ Do bring a list of questions you want answered, and information you want him to read including websites you have researched. Make notes if you need to.
- ☺ If you are following up from an Urgent Care or Emergency Room, do try and have those notes sent to your Doctors office in advance.
- ☺ When referred to a specialist, be sure you have the referral from the primary care physician, copies of your lab work and/or X-Rays with you on hand, if needed. The specialist is often unable to see you without the **referral** as they cannot be reimbursed for the visit.
- ☺ Always carry your doctor's business card in your wallet for ready reference or in case of an emergency.

SOCIAL AND LEGAL ISSUES:

- ☺ If there are custody issues requiring joint decisions by both parents, the legal papers need to be in the chart and the physician needs to know about this upfront. Don't assume that your doctor is aware of these issues.
- ☺ Avoid involving your doctor in your custody battles. Physicians are often uncomfortable taking sides with a particular parent and have no wish to be entangled in legal battles between parents.
- ☺ When requesting a friend/family member to bring the child to the office, the parent will be required to provide written permission for medical care.
- ☺ The new HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act 1996) regulations are very strict about releasing personal/medical information regarding the patient. The doctor's office will need you to sign a form if you want your medical information released to family members, agencies or other physicians.
- ☺ Allow enough time for such information to be sent to other physicians, agencies etc if required.

This may sound like a daunting comprehensive list of do's and don'ts but in reality is a practical common sense approach. Physicians and their offices will surely appreciate the time you take to become an informed, flexible and considerate patient. Not only will you receive a higher, potentially more satisfying level of service, but you will also learn to manage your own health issues better by following these simple tips! And that is surely a winning combination!

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