

Dear Consumer

Choosing a Doctor

By Esther Peterson

Some consumer choices are easier to make than others. When we shop at the supermarket we can compare brands and prices. If we shop for a new car we can compare different models, prices, fuel economy, special features, and options. In many cases, we can head to the library and check the numerous product testing reports and periodicals that provide comparative product information.

Choosing a doctor or other health care professional is another matter. It is much more difficult to get the kind of cost and quality information which is needed to make an informed choice. However, there are a number of tips we can all keep in mind when looking for a new doctor.

First, you have to consider your medical needs. If you don't have any special problems, you should be looking for a primary care physician. The primary care physician is usually a general practitioner (GP), a family doctor (what many GPs are referred to nowadays), or an internist (a physician specializing in internal medicine). These primary care physicians can take care of most of your needs, and, when necessary, they can refer you to a specialist, such as a cardiologist, surgeon, allergist, or gynecologist.

You may wish to avoid using a specialist as your personal doctor for two reasons. First, specialists may tend to limit your treatment options to their own special skills. For example, a surgeon may want to operate when drug therapy could be a reasonable alternative. Second, specialists frequently charge more than primary care physicians for the same service, such as setting a broken bone.

Once you've decided what kind of doctor you need, you should start identifying several potential candidates. Probably the best way to get a list of doctors is to simply ask your friends, relatives, or neighbors about their physicians. As consumers, they can give you information about the reasonableness of the doctor's prices, the doctor's availability (by phone or during emergencies), and the doctor's ability to communicate with his or her patients.

If you can not get good suggestions from your friends or you have just moved into the area, ask your former physician for recommendations or call a medical school or local hospital and ask for referrals. Ask for the names of physicians with teaching responsibilities at the hospital or medical school since they are likely to be up-to-date on the latest medical advancements and techniques. Even medical schools many miles from your new home can provide referrals because they probably have seen patients referred to the school's hospital by physicians in your area.

Another good source of information may be a local physician directory. Consumer groups in some areas have compiled directories of local physicians, many of which give information on fees, specialties, support personnel, education, certification, appointments, affiliations, in-office procedures offered, office hours, and other considerations in evaluating and selecting a physician.

According to the Health Research Group (HRG), a public interest organization operating out of Washington, D.C., there were physician directories for consumers in about 40 communities nationwide last year. HRG can tell you if there's a directory available in your area—and how to go about getting one if there is. For information write the Health Research Group, 2000 P St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036. The HRG also has *A Guide for Compiling a Consumers' Directory of Doctors* for groups interested in putting together a resource for consumers in their own communities who are looking for assistance in finding physicians. To obtain a copy send \$4.00 to the Health Research Group, Dept. A, at the above address.

After you've identified several candidates, the next step is to contact their offices to obtain some basic information about the doctor's qualifications, training, hospital affiliation, the length of time it ordinarily takes to get an appointment, and how emergency calls are handled.

Based on all the information you have gathered, now select the doctor who has impressed you the most and set up an appointment. A visit just to meet the doctor should be inexpensive.



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