

Herndon Family Medicine

Features to Look For In A Medical Home

Special points of interest:

- What to look for in a "Medical Home"
- Ask friends and family for their recommendations
- Don't be afraid to "break up" with your provider if it's not working for you
- Your medical provider should also be your advocate

If you haven't already heard the term "patient-centered medical home," chances are you will soon.

"Our health system has become so fragmented that patients don't know where to go for help and how to get it," said Ronald Epstein, M.D., professor and director of the Center for Communication and Disparities Research at the University of Rochester Medical Center in New York. The medical home, he said, is designed to "give patients someone who knows them as a person," guide them through the system, and make sure their "needs are placed front and center."



In a medical home, the doctor becomes an advocate for the patient, "not a gatekeeper that restricts

access to services," said Kevin Grumbach, M.D., chair of the department of family and community medicine at the University of California at San Francisco.

By keeping patients with chronic conditions healthier and out of hospitals and emergency rooms, and reducing wasteful and duplicative services (such as multiple tests when only one is needed),

Grumbach said, medical home practices "are also showing lower costs."

The new health-reform law includes incentives to create medical homes. Several states are already paying doctors extra to oversee the health needs of Medicaid recipients, and in some cases private insurers are participating in the experiments. Medicare is set to launch its own pilot program in coming years.

"Official" medical homes are still few and far between, but any practice can be more patient-centered. Here are some consumer-friendly features to look for:

- Can you get an urgent appointment within 24 hours?
- Can you reach somebody in the practice by phone at night or on weekends?
- Can you get your test results quickly via e-mail or telephone, or online?
- If you have a chronic condition, is there a system for tracking how you're doing?
- Does the practice include non-M.D. staff members such as



nutritionists or nurse-practitioners to help you manage your medications or chronic condition?

- Does your primary-care doctor keep track of your treatment by specialists?



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Your Medical Home



Tried-and-true strategies for finding the right doctor

You won't find detailed quality data on individual doctors here, or anywhere else, because we don't think anyone has figured out how to accurately measure the quality of care that they deliver. Yet 31 percent of the patients we polled wished that they had more information before choosing a doctor.

Sure, you can find your way to websites with basic information such as a doctor's medical school and board certification, and whether the practice is accepting new patients. But none of that information has much to do with a doctor's quality, according to a study published in the Sept. 13, 2010, issue of Archives of Internal Medicine.

The health-reform law called for a public website, Physician Compare, that will include information on physician quality, including patient outcomes, continuity, and coordination of care, efficiency, and safety. But the full site won't make its appearance until around 2015 at the earliest. Until then, use these tried-and-true strategies to find a doctor:

Ask people

Doctors we surveyed ranked getting a recommendation from family or friends as the most valuable method for choosing a physician. Next came referrals from other doctors.

Ask questions

The more that patients we surveyed knew about their doctors, the more satisfied they were. That held true for factual information, such as hospital affiliation and office hours, and especially for more qualitative information such as the doctor's personality and professional style.

Audition the doctor

Use your first appointment as an audition. If you have a specific health condition, ask how much experience that doctor has with it. And be open about other concerns you have.

"It's a little bit like dating," said Jessie Gruman, Ph.D., a patient advocate. "You really want this person to be responsive to a range of things, not just one aspect of your health."

Break up if it isn't working

"Your doctor is a service provider," Gruman said. "You wouldn't have a plumber back who was disrespectful to you or left a mess."

Reasons to dump your doctor might include a bad bedside manner, inability to communicate openly with you, an appointment calendar that's always full or disorganized, an unhelpful staff, or a perpetually backed-up waiting room.

Talk to your doctor about your concerns, and if nothing changes, consider finding another physician. Don't forget to have your medical records transferred.

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