



CHOOSING A DOCTOR TO DO YOUR SURGERY

By Warren Kolber

Finding a doctor who meets your needs is not hard. First, you should find out which doctors are approved by your health plan. You usually need to choose from this list. If you choose a doctor not on the list, you most likely will need to pay for the surgery yourself. You may want to ask your regular doctor whom he or she recommends. If you are lucky enough to have friends in the health care field, ask them who they think is good. Do not take your doctor's skills and knowledge for granted. Find a good doctor who often does the surgery you need. This may be the most important thing you do to help yourself get better.

How Do You Know if a Doctor is Good?

A good sign of a doctor's ability is if the American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) certifies him or her.¹ A certified doctor has completed several years of training in a certain area. He or she has passed a test. This shows that the doctor has the needed knowledge and skills. You can search the ABMS web site (<http://www.abms.org>) for free. Here you can learn if a doctor is certified.

Another good sign of a doctor's ability is the letters "FACS" (Fellow of the American College of Surgeons) after his or her name. This shows that the doctor has been evaluated. He or she has met both professional and moral standards from the American College of Surgeons (<http://www.facs.org>).²

You can learn about a doctor in your local library. You can find out his or her age and education. You also can find out if a doctor is certified. You can learn if he or she is a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons. The library staff can help you look for this information.³

Disciplinary Action

There are now 24 states that offer free information about doctors. A list of medical board web sites can be found at <http://www.fsmb.org>. Click on "State Medical Board Info." It is located on the left side of the home page. Then click on "Board Directory." You can get information for each state. Here you may find information about actions taken against a doctor.

State medical boards are in charge of licensing doctors in their states. Less than 2% of the nation's doctors had action taken against them in 1999. It is safe to say that most doctors have never been disciplined.⁴ You should, however, check with your state medical board about the doctor you plan to use.

Learning More About a Doctor

You should check certain information when choosing a doctor.

- What hospitals does the doctor use?
- How many times has the doctor done the surgery you are having?
- What is the doctor's success rate?
- What are the doctor's office routines?
- How does the doctor talk to and treat you?

You may want to have surgery done in a certain hospital. In this case, you must find a doctor who works at that hospital. You can call most hospitals for a list of their doctors. They usually do not tell you how good a doctor is. You also can call the doctor's office to find out which hospitals he or she uses.

If you wish to use a certain or famous doctor, think about

- whether your insurance will cover the costs of the surgery and his or her travel;
- the doctor's schedule;
- how you feel about the doctor; and
- the doctor's training, skills, and success rate.

Doctors who do more of a certain surgery tend to make fewer mistakes. They may be more aware of little things that might make the surgery turn out better. You may find a very experienced doctor who may not be as up to date on new information. Look for a doctor with lots of experience who also continues to learn new information.

What to Ask

The best way to find out about the doctor's experience is to ask questions.

- How many operations like mine have you done in the last two years?
- How many problems and or deaths happened?
- What is your success rate?
- How do you to keep up to date on the latest information?

The way the doctor answers these questions may be as important as what he or she says. If the doctor seems upset, it may mean that he or she does not want you to take an active role in your own care. Look for a doctor who encourages you to ask questions and listens to you carefully. A doctor should explain things clearly and treat you with respect. These behaviors mean that he or she most likely is very open to you being involved in your care.⁵

Here are some other questions that you may want to ask.

- Are you taking new patients?
- What are your office hours?
- When can I talk to you?
- Do you or someone else in the office speak my language?
- How many other doctors are in the office? Who will take care of me if you are not available?
- How long does it take to get an appointment?
- What happens if I need to cancel a visit? Will I still have to pay?
- How do I get emergency care or treatment?
- Will you or someone in the office give medical advice over the phone?

Be a Partner in Your Care

It is important that you participate in your care. You can do this by doing these things.

- Tell the doctor about your health problems. Tell your doctor anything that is important to know about you. Do not wait for him or her to ask you.
- Take your health history to your first visit. Ask your regular doctor for help if you do not know how to do this.
- Take a list of medicines you are taking.
- Tell your doctor about any herbal medicines or treatments you are using or plan to use.
- Write down questions before your visit. Ask the most important ones first.
- Bring someone with you to listen and help you ask questions if you are uneasy.
- Take notes.
- Ask if the doctor has information that you can take home.⁶

After you choose a doctor, he or she explains how your problem can be helped or fixed. Make sure you are comfortable with his or her plan. Did the doctor answer all your questions? Did he or she give you choices? Did the doctor tell you about problems that could happen during surgery? Did the doctor talk to you in a way you could understand? Did he or she explain why you need the operation? If not, you may want to choose another doctor. If a doctor advertises in newspapers or on TV, you may wonder why he or she does not get enough referrals from other doctors.

Call your regular doctor if you do not know what to do. Tell him or her what is planned. Ask if you should get a second opinion. Your doctor can help you make a good decision. If you still have doubts, get a second opinion. Many health plans require a second opinion. Call your health plan company to see if it will pay for one.

Quick Tips

Here are some quick tips for choosing a doctor.

- If you have health insurance, get a list of the doctors on their list.
- Make a list of doctors you like.
- Check their qualifications and experience.
- Check to see if your state medical board has disciplined a doctor on your list.
- Check what you learn with two or three other sources.
- Talk to the doctors you want to use. Ask them about their education, training, and experience. Find out what hospitals they work at. Learn about their office and how they treat their patients.

References

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3. L Galton, *The Patient's Guide to Surgery: How to Make the Best of Your Operation* (New York: Hearst Books, 1976).
4. K Hallam, "Physicians caught in the web. Thanks to Internet, doc discipline data now just a mouse click away," *Modern Healthcare* 30 (Sept 4, 2000) 30-32.
5. *Your Guide to Choosing Quality Health Care* (Rockville, Md: Agency for Health Care Policy and Research, 1999).
6. *Ibid.*