

# Be your own best advocate

## Essential skills for navigating the health-care system

BY SANDRA STRIEBY

**F**ACT of life: sooner or later just about everyone lands in the exam room. The good news is, you can stay in the driver's seat even while you're perched on a table covered with crinkly paper.

Getting and staying healthy in the 21st century requires us to be full partners in our own health care. This article is about how to do that by preparing, speaking up, and being proactive about both everyday health and special challenges.

### Local resources

- The Lookout Coalition provides medical and social-service support to people who are aging or facing difficult health challenges. Contact the coalition through Room One at (509) 997-2050 or [info@roomone.org](mailto:info@roomone.org).
- Methow At Home volunteers may be able to accompany members on health care visits. (509) 996-5844 or [manager@methowathome.org](mailto:manager@methowathome.org).
- Room One can help with advocacy on a range of issues. (509) 997-2050 or [info@roomone.org](mailto:info@roomone.org).
- Search "be your own health care advocate" online. Ask your provider which sources are trustworthy. Government sites and others run by established institutions may be most reliable

### Why advocate for yourself?

Shared decision-making has become the norm. "Fifty years ago, the doctor had all the knowledge and told you what to do. In current times we're partners with our health care providers and we make decisions together about our health care," says Dr. Raleigh Bowden, a retired physician and founder of the Lookout Coalition.

Your needs are important, and if you don't make those needs known, they may not be met.

### Prepare for your visit

To get the most out of an office visit, be prepared. Start by scheduling enough time. Most office visits last 15 minutes, but you can ask for a 30-minute appointment if you think your situation requires it.

It's ideal to focus on one main concern during your visit. If you'd like to discuss more than one thing, be realistic about how much can be covered. Prioritize topics and write down questions.

Think about what you want from the visit. The answer to a question? A prescription refill? Information about new symptoms? Let your provider know what's important to you so you can make a plan to use your time together efficiently.

Be prepared to talk about the background of your problem. "One of the gifts you can give your health care provider is a thoughtful history," says Dr. Elizabeth Weiss, also a retired physician and Methow At Home's board president.

Research your symptoms, if you like—just remember that not all sources are reliable. Dr. Allison Fitzgerald, a physician at Family Health Centers (FHC) in Twisp, says, "The best way to advocate for yourself is to seek information. But be really careful, and discriminating, about your sources."

Be ready to talk about any concerns, especially something that's scaring you. Practice with a

close friend or family member, if you think that will help, or prepare a written script for yourself. You may also want to bring someone with you—for support as well as to take notes and ask questions.

forget that your needs are what's important in that relationship."

Even with a trusted provider, you may need to ask for the kind of attention you need. Having the confidence to ask your provider to

**"Most physicians, nurses, health care providers of all sorts care deeply about doing the right thing for their patients, or for the people they serve. There are many pressures on them, to move quickly and to focus on the things that they know best. But that doesn't mean that they don't want and hope to help you make the best decisions for you."**

*Dr. Elizabeth Weiss, Methow At Home*

### Speak up for yourself

Once you're in the exam room, be honest and tell your provider the whole story. Talk about any fears. And be frank about whatever concerns you have, including financial ones. Providers can often find creative ways to contain health care costs.

Finding a provider you trust can make speaking up easier. Dr. Chris Hogness practiced at the Country Clinic in Winthrop (now the Methow Valley Clinic) for eight years; now he treats patients at Central Washington Hospital in Wenatchee. He says, "It's crucial that you have confidence that your primary-care provider is looking out for your best interests." Keep looking until you find someone you feel comfortable with, he recommends. Adds Weiss, "Never

meet your needs is one key to receiving good care, says Bowden. If you don't feel heard, she suggests saying, "I have a concern I want to talk to you about today ... are you able to listen for a few minutes?"

Combining courtesy and respect with assertiveness will also pave the way for effective communication. Bowden recommends "trying to listen to the doctor the way [you'd] want to be listened to. It's not a one-way street."

Once your dialog is underway, ask questions about anything you don't understand. Feel free to ask your provider to use plain language, slow down, draw a picture—anything that will help you get the message. Take notes so you'll remember important points.

If the provider's recommendations don't work for you, say so.

Let the provider know what you think you can do, and ask for help creating a plan that you will be able to follow. "You have to start somewhere," says Fitzgerald. "What's going to help you do that?"

Finally, before you leave, make sure you know how to follow up with your provider. If you think you may have questions, ask how to get them answered. Email? Telephone? A letter? A follow-up appointment?

### Special considerations for difficult situations

Some situations present special challenges.

In the hospital, you generally won't know your providers. Speak up if you don't think you're

getting through to your provider, says Hogness — "Be very explicit about it." If you still feel the hospital provider doesn't understand your concern, ask your primary-care provider to talk with him or her.

## Quick Tips – When Talking with Your Doctor

The single most important way you can stay healthy is to be an active member of your own health care team. One way to get high-quality health care is to find and use information and take an active role in all of the decisions made about your care.

Research has shown that patients who have good relationships with their doctors tend to be more satisfied with their care—and to have better results. Here are some tips to help you and your doctor become partners in improving your health care.

### GIVE INFORMATION. DON'T WAIT TO BE ASKED!

- You know important things about your symptoms and your health history. Tell your doctor what you think he or she needs to know.
- It is important to tell your doctor personal information—even if it makes you feel embarrassed or uncomfortable.
- Bring a "health history" list with you, and keep it up to date. You might want to make a copy of the form for each member of your family.
- Always bring any medicines you are taking, or a list of those medicines (include when and how often you take them) and what strength. Talk about any allergies or reactions you have had to your medicines.
- Tell your doctor about any herbal prod-

ucts you use or alternative medicines or treatments you receive.

- Bring other medical information, such as x-ray films, test results, and medical records.

### GET INFORMATION

- Ask questions. If you don't, your doctor may think you understand everything that was said.
- Write down your questions before your visit. List the most important ones first to make sure they get asked and answered.
- You might want to bring someone along to help you ask questions. This person can also help you understand and/or remember the answers.
- Ask your doctor to draw pictures if that might help to explain something.

### TAKE NOTES

- Some doctors do not mind if you bring a tape recorder to help you remember things. But always ask first.
- Let your doctor know if you need more time. If there is not time that day, perhaps you can speak to a nurse or physician assistant on staff. Or, ask if you can call later to speak with someone.
- Ask if your doctor has washed his or her hands before starting to examine

you. Research shows that handwashing can prevent the spread of infections. If you're uncomfortable asking this question directly, you might ask, "I've noticed that some doctors and nurses wash their hands or wear gloves before touching people. Why is that?"

### TAKE INFORMATION HOME

- Ask for written instructions.
- Your doctor also may have brochures and audio tapes and videotapes that can help you. If not, ask how you can get such materials.

### ONCE YOU LEAVE THE DOCTOR'S OFFICE, FOLLOW UP

- If you have questions, call.
- If your symptoms get worse, or if you have problems with your medicine, call.
- If you had tests and do not hear from your doctor, call for your test results.
- If your doctor said you need to have certain tests, make appointments at the lab or other offices to get them done.
- If your doctor said you should see a specialist, make an appointment.

*Information courtesy of the Association for Healthcare Research and Quality, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*



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*Dr. Raleigh Bowden,  
Lookout Coalition*

Chronic conditions may require long-term commitment, and support can be extra important. FHC uses group visits “to help patients advocate for themselves and work with others with similar issues,” says Fitzgerald. “It’s a way for patients to learn how to take better care of themselves.”

If English is not your first language, let the receptionist know when you make your appointment so translation can be arranged. Some local practitioners speak Spanish. Translators for many languages are available via computer. You may wish to ask a family member who is fluent in English and knows about your condition and medications to go with you to the exam.

#### **In your daily life**

Part of being your own advocate is being proactive about your health. If you’re having a problem, don’t wait to seek care. Keep your medication regimen up to date.

Talk with your provider if your medications don’t seem to be helping. Before starting a new medication, ask your provider to check for drug interactions with any existing medication.

Keep records; use a journal to track health problems and solutions. Know your medications if you can — carrying a list with the name, purpose, and dosage of each one will make sure that information is available any time you need it.

Recognize that some health conditions take time — and multiple office visits — to address. Know that past experiences can affect your health. “You don’t have to let those past experiences define you ... having mentors and having support [can help to] overcome some of those past events,” says Fitzgerald. You can ask your providers to help you make good choices moving forward.

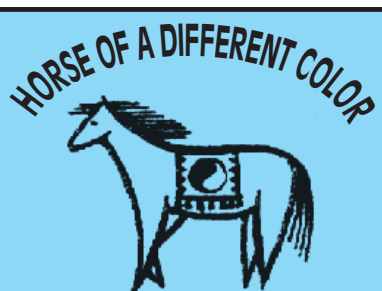
Think about emergency and end-of-life choices.

Consider what’s really important to you, and be ready for difficult situations.

Finally, remember that your well-being is important to your providers — they are there to support your good health.

“Most physicians, nurses, health care providers of all sorts care deeply about doing the right thing for their patients, or for the people they serve,” says Weiss. “There are many pressures on them, to move quickly and to focus on the things that they know best. But that doesn’t mean that they don’t want and hope to help you make the best decisions for you.” Being your own advocate is a way to make the most of each provider’s time and skills so you can get the best possible care. ♦

*Interested in learning more about health advocacy? Watch for information about a community presentation sometime in the next few months.*



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