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THINGS TO LOOK FOR TO GET BETTER HEALTH CARE

By Toyomi Igus

When patients have a trusting, respectful relationship with a doctor who listens, they believe that they are getting good health care. However, while trusting your doctor is very important, today it takes more than a good doctor to provide high quality care.

What is quality care? Quality care is complete: getting the right care, treatment, and support you need at the right time. Quality care is coordinated: making sure that all of the health care services you receive—from doctors, nurses, laboratories, radiology services, specialty services, and hospitals—are coordinated to deliver the best possible medical outcomes. Quality care is also accountable: your health care providers take responsibility for providing you with the best care they can cost-effectively, eliminating waste, and redundancy whenever possible.

Here are five things you should look for to know when you are getting quality care:

1 **Your doctor and your medical group actively coordinate the health care services you need.**

Medical conditions often require a patient to see several clinicians: doctors, specialists, lab technicians, therapists, and other care providers. All of these people need your medical information. They also need to talk to each other about your care to make sure that you are not subjected to unnecessary tests, medication errors, or costs that can occur when there is a lack of communication between them. You know your care is being well coordinated when:

- Your specialists have easy access to your complete medical record—the same record that your general practice doctor or primary care physician refers to.
- Follow-up care such as health education classes, physical therapy, and tests is easy to get through your doctor's office.
- Your hospital care is coordinated with your doctor and your specialists. All care providers know when you are being discharged, what your discharge instructions are, and follow up with you.
- You don't have to repeat yourself or keep track of your own medications, test results, or X-rays, and you feel that everyone caring for you is informed about who you are, the care you have received, and what you need next.

2 **Your doctor works as a partner in maintaining your health by taking a proactive, preventive approach to your health care.**

You know your doctor believes in a patient-centered approach to care when:

- Your physician or other health care providers in his practice listen well and make inquiries about your lifestyle to determine what might have an effect on your health.



- Your doctor routinely recommends preventive care and provides you with health education information, health classes, and clear treatment instructions.
- You have easy access to medical advice and guidance 24 hours a day.
- Other health care services, such as X-ray and imaging, lab, specialty, or education services are co-located with your doctor's office or conveniently located nearby.
- Your doctor's medical group has a robust web site from which you can access such services as making appointments, getting lab information, health education information, etc.

3 **There is good teamwork between your primary care doctor, your specialists, and your doctor's supporting staff.**

This type of care-team structure generally occurs in a medical group where primary care physicians and their staff—in partnership with a variety of specialists—work together to provide coordinated care to the group's patients. You know this is the case when:

- There are other doctors, nurse practitioners (NPs), or physician's assistants (PAs) who can step in to care for you when your doctor is not available, and they have easy access to all of your medical records and history (ideally through an electronic medical record or EMR).
- You feel that there is good communication going on between all of the people who care for you about your condition.
- Your doctor can consult with a community of doctors in the practice about major medical decisions to ensure that judgments are sound and that all possible treatment options are considered.

4 **Your doctor and the medical staff seem up to date in their clinical knowledge and skills because:**

- Your doctor is aware of new treatments and drugs for your condition, and can talk knowledgeably with you about them.
- Your doctor helps you make informed decisions by discussing the pros and cons of various treatment options with you.
- Your doctor probably has some type of support to stay on top of advancements in medical science.
- You are asked for feedback (usually through a survey) about the care and services you get from your doctor. This helps your doctor's practice assess and improve the skills of their doctors, nurses, and other staff. Clinicians who are held accountable for the quality of care they provide are motivated to continually improve their skills.

Health care treatments change rapidly, so keeping abreast of latest scientific research is very hard to do for the busy doctor

who practices alone or in a small group. There is simply too much information to be easily researched and absorbed by any one person.

5 **Your doctor's practice makes use of information technologies (including electronic medical records) to share your medical information with the specialists that you also see.**

Medical practices that use information technologies, such as an electronic medical record and robust, interactive websites, strive to achieve better coordination of care for you. They have made this investment because they know that sharing information among all care providers results in better care and treatment. Advanced health information technology allows your doctor and medical staff to:

- Have all the correct information about your care (medications, last visit information, lab results, etc.) without you having to provide it.
- Have complete information about the care that you receive outside of the doctor's office, such as in the emergency room, urgent care visits, after-hours calls for care, etc.
- Check for drug interactions and get alerts about when you should receive a follow-up treatment.
- Get information about the latest in medical advancements so that your doctor can work with you to get the best care.
- Have access to patient medical records either from their home or after-hours.
- Make your test and lab information easily and readily available to patients on-line.

The fragmented American health care system today is a major cause of our rapidly increasing health care costs. It is also the reason why so many Americans are still receiving less-than-optimal care.

Doctors and medical groups who strive to build their practices around the five principles described here are doctors who take accountability for the cost and quality of the care they provide. They believe that team-based care and coordination results in better medical results for the patient.

There are many physician groups and practices around the country that are working towards this goal of accountable, coordinated care. Is your doctor's practice one of them?

Note: In 2001, The Institute of Medicine made specific recommendations to the health care community about how to improve the care that Americans receive. Based on their recommendations, the American Medical Group Association's Council of Accountable Physician Practices (CAPP) put together this checklist to help patients understand what quality coordinated care can and should be in today's world. For more information about CAPP, please visit www.amga-capp.org.

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