



# How To Talk With Your Doctor

By Lawrence F. Schrader, M.D., F.A.C.S

Midsouth Orthopedic Associates

Many people express difficulty with getting and understanding their medical care. In times past, physicians did not have to contend with complex insurance billing, Government Mandated record standards, or the constant barrage of electronic interruptions. There was time to see patients and teach them and their families what was diagnosed and treatment options (of course there were fewer diagnoses and treatment options 20 years ago), and liability issues were much fewer. If you understand your Doctors working conditions you can deal better with these problems which are here to stay. First, I'll address what to expect from your doctor, and then, just as importantly, what your Doctor needs from you.

To become a Physician your doctor finished 4 years of College, 4 years of Medical School and usually 3 to 4 years of residency for Primary Care or 5 to 6 years of Surgical Specialists. Figure 13 years **after** high school. Usually Physicians are into their 30's before they start their first job and have accumulated \$100,000 or more of student loan debt. Needless to say their family life is delayed or seriously altered.

When you plan to see your doctor you should expect to be treated respectfully and you should be seen in a "timely fashion". Timeliness causes the most confusion for patients. Let's first consider a follow-up visit to your doctor. In the past doctors typically allowed 15 to 20 minutes to see a follow-up patient. A follow up visit is a problem that your doctor has already identified and your returning for any discussion of test results and effectiveness of your treatments. Under those circumstances there is usually adequate time for your doctor to explain any follow-up test results or diagnosis and any changes in your plan of treatment since your last visit. Also, within that time

your doctor may need to arrange for further testing, change prescriptions, and must prepare a written document of all this to comply with rigid governmental standards. This takes time to dictate a concise document of your care and extra personnel to coordinate and comply with all regulations.

This time does not allow for multiple interruptions of the doctor from hospitals, emergency rooms, other physicians and patients (including your cell phone). It also does not allow for the doctor to fill out extraneous disability insurance forms which do not affect the patient's medical care. These insurance policies are a separate contract between patients and insurance companies and the physician is not compensated by the insurance companies nor required to fill out these forms.

Expect that your doctor will fill these out at a later time. Physicians will charge between \$20 to \$250 dollars to complete this paper work and render legal opinions and documentation as required. The fee is based on the volume of information required, and the medical legal complexity of the document.

Follow-up visits also do not set aside time for new, unplanned, or additional medical problems. "Doctor my knee is better, but my shoulder has been killing me can you just take a look at that too." Not only is there inadequate time for this additional problem, but insurance companies have made it virtually impossible for physicians to be reimbursed for this additional work. These are new problems and fall into a different category to be discussed shortly.

It is easy to see how under the best of circumstances a physician could only see 25 follow-up patients in one day, given that the above interruptions are almost inevitable

during the physician's day. Now fast forward to 2006. Physicians have had a pay cut every year for the past 20 years for providing these services. The government, through Medicare, sets the standards for reimbursements for all medical and surgical work. Presently, I receive less than 30% of my surgical fees as compared to 1986. In am providing the same services, but, as you can imagine, with the cost of living increases, this is only 10-15% of what I used to earn. No other profession has such a poor record. The cost of running an office has dramatically increased with additional governmental requirements. In order to stay in business most physicians have had to dramatically increase the number of patients seen each day. Now instead of 25 patients per day often many more patients are scheduled. In reality, your doctor only has about 5 minutes face to face per patient, and often has to overbook to keep the doors open.

New problems take even more time. The doctor needs to get the "story" or history, conduct an examination, and perform or order necessary tests. A plan is formulated and initiated with some follow-up or disposition of the problem. This should require 20 - 30 minutes face to face, but is often condensed.

If you are new to the office or another doctor has sent you for an opinion, then your entire medical history will be required and this may take an hour by itself. Previous treatment or test results will be reviewed if available, as well as a new examination and frequently new tests. Median time for this is 40 - 80 minutes. Hopefully, you now have some idea of what it takes for your doctor to keep his doors open. Here's how you can help and get the most out of the time you have.

# Midsouth Wellness Guide

If you are new to this doctor or have not seen him in several years you must bring an updated medical history. For your own benefit you should keep a written copy for yourself and bring one with you to the office. This contains a list of any and all medical problems you have and any problems that are being successfully treated. For example, if you are being treated for high blood pressure successfully, you still have the disease and it should be noted. I have had patients comment "no I don't have high blood pressure any more, I take medicine for it". This is valuable information for safely providing care by any physician. For each problem you need to provide when it started and how old you were or what year it started, any medicines and surgeries for that problem. Your doctor will need the names and milligrams, dosage and how often you take your medicines. We ask our patients to bring all bottles of medicine they are presently taking in a plastic zip lock bag so we may document these accurately. Don't expect your doctor to guess what your medications are, example "I take 2 green pills 2 times a day", your physician needs accurate information to treat you. Provide a list of any medicines that you are allergic to and give examples like "when I take penicillin I get a rash all over my body." List all of your surgical procedures and when they were done and by whom, at least to the best of your knowledge. Provide as much information as you remember, of medical conditions of your family tree, example "my mother and grandmother have diabetes". Most new evaluations will ask whether you are having any symptoms in other areas, even if they are not related to your visit that day.

Do not rely on hospitals or other physician offices to send reports to your new doctor (it doesn't happen). We recommend that you personally bring copies of your medical history, laboratory tests, and x-rays with you. This way you are guaranteed your doctor will have all your information at the time of your visit.

It should go without saying that your insurance information is with you and up to date. This information is necessary to verify that your visit will be covered by your insurance and that you are aware of deductibles and co-pays that may have to be paid prior to being seen by the physician. If this is not available, then expect a cash deposit just as your Dentist does. Depending on the system utilized by the doctor, this can easily take 1 hour and will be much faster if you are prepared as recommended up above. Most of the time, if you provide accurate information about your problem, your doctor will be able to arrive at a diagnosis much quicker. As much as 90% of the time, once the doctor has heard an accurate story, the diagnosis can be made even before

an examination. This is what you need to be able to tell your doctor so he can diagnose you correctly.

## Why are you there?

My stomach hurts

My knee hurts

## How long has it bothered you?

1 week

3 months

Many years

## Was there an injury?

I fell on my knee

No, I ate some bad seafood

## What was going on when it started?

I was running

## Where exactly does it hurt and has it changed or moved?

Pointing is ok

## Can you describe the pain?

Aching, burning, electrical

## Does anything make it better or worse?

## What if any treatment have you had so far?

Medicine, surgery

If you have answered these questions ahead of time, your doctor can quickly move to follow up questions to shed light on the problem. Keep in mind be as specific as possible, but brief. That way the doctor can quickly get the needed information. Information with a lot of extra detail is not that helpful. Remember time is limited. Recounting your back pain every day for the last three months will not be helpful. However, it may be quite helpful to recount stomach pain for the hour or two before and after eating. Just keep things simple and **pause** so that you doctor can direct things in a useful direction. If there are other concerns such as another area, let your doctor know that you would like to address that at another time.

Expect an examination of the area involved. Wear clothes that accommodate if possible. I personally prefer my discussions with patients in street clothes and only use exam gowns and shorts during the physical examination. I usually start with the least painful areas and examine the most painful last.

There will be a discussion of the doctor's findings. If any tests have been done, the results should be reviewed. The doctor should give you an idea of the diagnosis or possible diagnosis and any further testing needed to clarify this. Finally a treatment plan should

be explained. Many doctors will have prepared information or handouts on things they commonly take care of. Recent studies show patients remember only 15-20% of what they were told. Don't feel bad if it doesn't make sense at first, but ask for simpler explanations and handouts.

Now what can you expect from your doctor? Unfortunately, we are often behind, but only because we cannot accurately predict how much time any patient will need. Most of us will evaluate that second problem or answer multiple phone calls or wrestle with insurance forms. We shouldn't but we often do.

When you see the doctor you should have time (with the doctor's help) to describe your concern. The examination should be briefly described and completed. If there are tests done in the office, the results should be discussed. I review any x-rays with my patients to see where the problem is.

Most importantly, your doctor should be able to explain your diagnosis or possible diagnosis in terms that you can understand. This includes whether any further testing will help, and what will likely happen with or without medical intervention. You should be told in general how the treatments help, and what risk these treatments have (what bad things the treatments do). This applies to all treatment, medication, physical therapy, and surgery. You should be able to clarify things at this time, but be ready to check out, and schedule again if recommended.

The doctor's office has changed a lot since the "Marcus Welby" days. If we all work together we can continue to have high quality personalized medical care. Have you noticed the rich and powerful come here for care and not Canada or England. We can preserve our system if we understand it and empower those who are the providers. If we chose not to assign value to health care how can we keep the best and brightest in our hospitals and clinics and not our board rooms.

**WG**

## About The Author

Dr. Lawrence F. Schrader is a Board Certified Orthopedic Surgeon, a fellow of the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons, a member of The Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Christian Medical Society, and the American Academy of Disability Evaluating Physicians. He is presently Chief of Surgery at Delta Medical Center in Memphis. Dr. Schrader attended medical school at the University of California at San Francisco. He served in Iraq during Desert Storm as a trauma surgeon, receiving an Army Commendation. To contact Dr. Schrader call 901-465-4300