



You have a Choice in your Health Care!

By Leah Smejkal, PT, CMTPT

You have a choice. You can let that nagging pain that's been bothering you linger, or you can do something about it. You can either try to work it out yourself, or seek medical care. What should you do? How do you choose what is right for you? In our ever-changing health care environment, it is important that we start to really think about this subject. More and more, health care is becoming an expense that can be overwhelming. Premiums, deductibles, co-pays and co-insurance costs continue to rise. In order to get a handle on what we spend on health care, as individuals and as a nation, we need to take some self-responsibility in the decisions required to optimize health.

Consider yourself a health care consumer, not just a patient. What's the difference? As a patient, it can be implied that you are "patient"-ly waiting for the doctor to make decisions for you. In this more passive role, you do whatever someone else tells you to do. As a consumer of health care, you are making decisions on how, where and when you will be treated. Consumers purchase a product (in this case, health care) and typically seek to buy the highest quality product at the lowest price. With health care, the product is a service. Essentially, you are seeking to purchase the best care at an affordable price. It is important to seek prompt treatment for illness or injury either through self-care or with high quality health care providers who will give you the best results for your money. Untreated conditions often end up reoccurring and costing more in the long run. So, looking at yourself as the consumer, think back to the original question. How do you choose what is right for you? Do you try to work it out yourself, or seek medical care? Usually you can self treat if the injury is minor, seems to be improving already, responds favorably to over-the-counter medications such as ibuprofen or Tylenol, and if the injury generally does not keep you from performing your normal activities for more than a day or so. If symptoms or worsening of symptoms, you cannot perform normal daily activities such as walking, dressing or lifting, or if this is a recurring problem for which the cause needs to be investigated, you should seek medical care. Listen to your gut instinct.

If you do require assistance, a medical doctor can evaluate your condition and order tests to rule out serious injury or illness. The primary treatment from a medical doctor is medicine. The doctor can also refer you to other practitioners if non-medicine treatment is preferred, such as in the case of a person who already takes many medications for the other conditions and there is a risk of side effects. Alternative therapies are appropriate in that case, or when it is clearly a musculoskeletal injury or condition for which medication is not the most effective. The most common alternative therapies are chiropractic care, massage therapy and physical therapy. Chiropractors primarily treat through manipulation of the joints and some soft tissue work. Massage therapists primarily do soft tissue work. Physical Therapists perform joint and soft tissue work, assess movement problems, and prescribe exercises to correct imbalances. Your doctor can help you determine which specialty would be most effective, but you should also do your own research.

Who to see within a specialty? Just as you have a choice in where you get your prescriptions filled, you have a choice in providers. Choose a provider who makes you feel comfortable and respected, who encourages you to ask questions and be an active participant in your care. That provider should give you a good idea about how long it will take for you to recover and should have a plan for collaborating with other health care providers if there is not significant improvement within a reasonable time frame. It should be someone you would trust to treat your family and friends and someone you trust to help you achieve optimal health. You can do an Internet search to help locate a provider and give information about their background and treatments they provide. However, most people will agree that the best source to find a good provider is word of mouth. Ask for recommendations from friends and relatives, or ask your doctor whom his/her family sees.

Cost effectiveness will be achieved if you choose the best provider at the nearest location. This should be a provider who spends enough time with evaluation to determine an accurate diagnosis and cause. They should try cheaper alternatives first, but consider that some might need more expensive treatment or diagnostics right away. They should look to achieve long-term results, not just a temporary fix by addressing the cause versus just treating the symptoms. You want someone who values prevention and doesn't just treat reactively. They should be willing to teach you how to enhance treatment with home remedies. Many providers also help to control expenses by offering free consults or free samples prior to initiating fees for services. Ideally, you want someone who can treat you in the fewest visits with the best results. It is important that they focus on return of function, not just on pain relief. There should be enough follow through to ensure success but they should not continue to treat if goals are met or treatment is not effective within a reasonable time frame.

Taking responsibility to research your health care options will not only help you find the best care, but also save money through wise choices in cost effective treatments.

In conclusion: Questions to ask!

To stay cost effective, consider location of services, time the provider spends with you, and results. The following check list of questions may be helpful:

1. Where is the provider located? We are fortunate to live in a town that has excellent medical doctors and alternative therapies, so you don't have to drive to the "big city" for good care. This saves money on travel expenses. You don't have to stay within one hospital system or organization.
2. Does my insurance cover this provider? Check with your insurance plan to make sure the provider is in-network; since you will pay more to an out-of-network provider.
3. How long is my appointment going to be? If you are limited to a certain number of visits per year, it is wise to choose a provider who spends more time with you, therefore accomplishing maximum results with the fewest visits.
4. Does the provider look at the whole person rather than just the area of complaint? You want to be sure that proper screening is done to look for a cause and not just treat symptoms. He or she should also encourage you to make other healthy lifestyle changes such as diet and exercise, and provide resources for these.

5. Is there a personality match? Personally, I would rather see the doctor who spends time with me and answers all my questions rather than the doctor who graduated at the top of his class but has no bedside manner. Do they encourage you to ask questions?
6. Do their patients get better, and if not do they make sure you are referred on?
7. Is there good follow-up care?
8. Is there communication with your other medical providers?
9. Do they spend time educating you about your condition?

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