



The Care Group, P.C.

Making the Most of a Medical Appointment

By Gerard L. Guillory, M.D.

From the front desk of my medical office in Aurora, Colo., I can see new faces in the waiting room. The staff and I will welcome these patients warmly, hoping to put them at ease, get acquainted with their medical needs, and do our best to help them deal with any questions, worries and health issues. I'm always pleased to see the practice grow.

It's what I'm *not* seeing in the waiting room that troubles me. This year, many of our longtime patients are no longer with us. In most such cases, their employers switched health-insurance plans late last year, hoping to keep costs in check.

Although this trend has brought our primary-care practice—The Care Group, P.C.—at least as many patients as it has taken from us, it is nonetheless worrisome. I can't help wondering how my old friends are doing. Some of them, no doubt, are seated in similar waiting rooms this very moment, thumbing through magazines, filling out forms, digging through billfolds to find insurance cards, and hoping the new doctor works out all right.

One of the reasons I entered internal medicine 22 years ago was that I liked the idea of developing long-term relationships with patients. I looked forward to caring for people as they grew and matured, raised families, became grandparents, retired and—along the way—dealt with the health challenges that life presented. Although many of my longtime patients are still with me, the rising cost of health insurance has triggered dizzying levels of turnover in recent years.

This year, I lost an unusually large block of patients when one of Aurora's largest employers changed insurance plans. As of Jan. 1, many patients who had been with me for more than a decade were placed under someone else's care. Some of them have chronic medical conditions that require multiple medications and regular visits to the doctor. Others are facing serious personal challenges that have taken a toll on their health. A few are awaiting surgery or recently have undergone surgery.

Over the years, these people had come to me to discuss the full range of aches, pains, lumps, bumps and worries that life brings. And together, we had done battle with these challenges. I wonder how they are doing. Are they getting the care they need? Does the new doctor have a complete, accurate picture of their health? What's ahead for them?

I don't expect the turnover in the waiting room to stop soon. Hewitt Associates, which annually surveys large employers regarding health-care costs, recently forecast annual premium increases of 7.7 percent for 2007, after employers were hit with increases of 7.9 percent in 2006. Hewitt estimates that, for the average large employer, health costs per person will reach \$8,340 this year.

With costs that steep—and getting steeper—it isn't surprising that many employers are making changes, even at the expense of the time-honored doctor-patient relationship. I can't stop the change process anymore than my patients can, but we can work together to see our way through a difficult situation. Perhaps the most important thing, from where I'm standing now, is that we simply make the most of our time together.

With that in mind, I have written a prescription for the optimal office visit—10 things that you, as a patient, can do to make the most of your next medical appointment, whether you are seeing a new doctor or returning to someone you have known for years.

1. Check out your doctor's Website. It should provide office hours, phone numbers and addresses as well as forms you will need to fill out before your first visit. Print out the needed forms, fill them out at home and bring them with you on your visit.
2. If your doctor doesn't have a Website and hasn't sent you any forms to fill out, visit our Website at www.thecaregroup.com and review the forms we provide our new patients. Feel free to fill these out and take them to your doctor. He or she probably will be asking for the same information.
3. Make a list of your medical conditions and your medications (and doses).
4. Make a list of any vitamins and supplements you take.
5. Keep a diary regarding your health, medications and life events. Often, the onset of medical problems coincides with other changes—starting a new prescription or supplement, changing your diet, or dealing with new sources of stress in your life.
6. Before you call for an appointment, list and prioritize the issues you hope to address.
7. When you make the call, mention all the reasons for the visit. This will help the staff allocate an appropriate amount of time for your visit.
8. After you check in, let the medical assistant know whether you need refills for any prescriptions. Often, he or she can begin to take care of this while you are visiting with the doctor.
9. Bring your insurance card.
10. Consider seeing your old doctor, even if he or she isn't a part of the network with which your new insurance plan contracts. Many plans cover out-of-network care; the patient simply pays a higher co-payment. It may be worth the extra expense to hang onto a relationship built over many years.

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