

How to Select a Medical Specialist

By Charles Hoffman

“Most surgeons will readily provide information about the number of successful procedures they’ve performed -- if you’re looking at the same surgery, you might feel more comfortable with someone who has performed 200 procedures than someone who has performed 20.”

Of course, nowadays selecting a medical specialist has more to do with what your particular health insurance plan will allow than any particular preference – but where your health is concerned you still have a measure of control when faced with a condition where your primary physician recommends you see a specialist. You should, however, check with your health plan regarding their referral policy, as well as any additional charges you may have to pay if the recommended doctor or procedures he recommends happen to be “out of network” or not specifically covered by your medical insurance.

Once you have resolved your questions concerning your insurance company’s procedures regarding specialists, you should make every effort to inform yourself of the doctor’s qualifications and, of course, get a second opinion regarding your condition and course of treatment. Most doctors today understand both the cost of medical care and the necessity of getting more than one opinion, and if your particular physician appears to have a problem with your seeking out other advice well, all the more reason to do so. In addition, your local chapter of the AMA will have listings of doctors and their specialties, and you should expect to see some sort of references or list of the specialist’s degrees and accomplishments. Though approaching a doctor in this way may make you, and perhaps them, uncomfortable, remember that you are not approaching any doctor with suspicion and are merely trying to ensure – in an uncertain world – that the doctor you choose is qualified and willing to work with you to solve your problem. You should never be embarrassed about asking for qualifications or references or seeking outside advice regarding choosing a specialist or any physician.

Most medical specialties from psychiatry to gastroenterology also have professional organizations, journals and also educational or other requirements you can check for further information on a specialist – good things to know include how long the specialist has been practicing in your area, what hospitals and universities he or she is associated with (doctors involved in teaching are more likely to be informed of the latest medical developments) and what, if any awards or citations they have received. Your library is also a good place to look for information – particularly if there are specific doctors in whom you are interested. Also, speak to other medical professionals you may know – again, remember, you are not trying to “get the dirt”

on someone but merely to find out information to help you make an informed decision about whom you would like to provide you with critical medical information and care. For example, most surgeons will readily provide information about the number of successful procedures they've performed -- if you're looking at the same surgery, you might feel more comfortable with someone who has performed 200 procedures than someone who has performed 20.

Along these same lines, your local college or university, if they have a medical school, may be able to give you information on specialists associated with their departments as lecturers or guests -- or to give you an idea of who the most prominent people in the field are -- if you want to learn about the best, sometimes it's best to head directly to the top. Places, which are renowned for their care like Rochester Minnesota's Mayo Clinic or New York Sloan-Kettering Cancer center, are also good places to go to research specialists both at their facilities and in your area.

Your local Better Business Bureau and other consumer organizations are also good places to seek out information -- particularly if you have some cause for concern about a specific doctor. Of course, one of the best ways of finding a specialist and one that we probably all use most often is through our network of friends and acquaintances. Perhaps your doctor can direct you to patients with a similar diagnosis who used the services of this specialist, or perhaps someone at your church, community group -- even your gym or your children's school PTA -- has had the same condition and can recommend a doctor. Finally, speaking from personal experience, one of the best ways to get information about who the best doctors are is to ask a nurse -- nurses are privy to the best and most recent information and, if your specialist is associated with a hospital, you could do worse than ask a few of the nurses in his area what they think of him or her.