

Choosing the best doctor

March 24 2009, By Robyn Shelton

Finding a good doctor is both harder and easier than ever before. Harder because insurance restricts your options. Easier because government and other health-care Web sites are putting more information about doctors at your fingertips.

But what really matters? Where [doctors](#) go to school? If they're board-certified? Their bedside manner?

"There are a lot of things you want to put into the equation," said Dr. John Guarneri, a Winter Park, Fla., gynecologist and president of Florida Hospital's medical staff. "There's no doubt it is a challenge, but I hope most people would take the time, given that you're putting your life in the hands and the mind" of your doctors.

To get started, ask your health plan provider about participating doctors. Then grill friends and family for suggestions. Talk to any nurses or other health-care workers you know. They have the inside scoop.

Once you get a few names, what then?

The Internet is rife with information. You can learn a lot on paper, but in the end it's the face-to-face contact that tells you the most. Sometimes your rapport with a doctor makes a big difference.

Not so much if you're only going to see the doctor for a short time, said Dr. Arnold Einhorn, president of the Orange County (Fla.) Medical Society and chief of staff for Orlando Health.

"If it's the surgeon who's going to take out your gallbladder, and that's it, then it probably doesn't matter if you like them or not," he said. "But if you're going to see them on a fairly frequent basis, it's important to have someone you're comfortable with so you can talk to them about your problems."

HealthGrades

Site: healthgrades.com

Directions: Click on "Research Physician" at the top of the home page. Enter the physician's last name, specialty and city/state.

What it offers: A variety of information, some free and some paid. Free: Basic physician background, similar to what you can find on the state's "Practitioner Profile" Web site. Also free, patient feedback surveys that rate doctors and their office staff in areas such as wait time and friendliness.

Paid services include a full report on a doctor (\$12.95), including disciplinary and malpractice history (not available from all states but Florida is included). You also can get ratings and information on the quality of the hospitals used by the doctor. For a monthly fee (\$9.95), you can sign up for the "Watchdog" e-mail notification program that will notify you of changes in a doctor's disciplinary history and other information.

Advantages: Detailed and verified information, including disciplinary histories in other states.

Disadvantages: It's not free.

CheckMD.com

Site: checkMD.com

Directions: Click on "Research Physicians" and type in doctor's last name and city/state.

What it offers: Education, disciplinary history, patient recommendations, health-related forums, chat rooms, blogs and health-care videos. Doctors can interact with patients by adding additional information and videos to their files.

Advantages: Free background and patient education in one place.

Disadvantages: Disciplinary history limited to where the doctor currently is practicing. Will not include actions taken by a previous state.

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