

Doctors recommend different treatments for patients than for themselves

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(PhysOrg.com) -- The act of making a recommendation appears to change the way physicians think regarding medical choices, and they often make different choices for themselves than what they recommend to patients, according to a survey study published in the April 11 issue of *Archives of Internal Medicine*.

A patient who can't decide between two available treatments asks his doctor: "What should I do?" Another patient, torn between the same two treatments, asks: "Doctor, what would you do if you were me?"

Will those two patients get the same answer? That question, posed by researchers from Duke University and the University of Michigan in a national survey of physicians, found doctors often recommend different treatments for patients than they would choose for themselves.

The study, from professor Peter Ubel and post-doctoral associate Andrea Angott of Duke University's Fuqua School of Business and professor Brian Zikmund-Fisher of the University of Michigan, appears in the April 11 edition of the *Archives of Internal Medicine*. Funding for the study was provided by the American Cancer Society, the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health.

In the study, the researchers conducted a randomized experiment asking some physicians to make a recommendation to a patient seeking advice, while other physicians were asked what they themselves would choose as a patient facing the same health care decision.

Doctors frequently advised patients to pursue treatments with higher rates of side effects and lower mortality rates, while choosing treatments with lower rates of side effects and higher mortality rates for themselves.

"Our research found that people felt living with a colostomy or being paralyzed was better than dying. From that perspective, the 'right' decision is to take the risk of side effects and reduce the chances of dying," Ubel said.

However, emotions brought on by potential significant side effects often push people away from the "right" decision. Doctors -- free from the side effects of treatment -- can make more objective treatment recommendations to their patients.

"When making recommendations to patients, physicians can push aside any emotions that would lead them astray," Ubel said. "But those emotions may loom large when a doctor is deciding for him or herself. In other words, the act of giving advice to others may reset the balance between emotion and reason."

Ubel noted, "Many physicians are biased by their own backgrounds, valuing things that patients don't necessarily value, or they can even be influenced by financial and professional conflicts of interest that can skew judgment."

As a result, you might not always get the objective advice you seek, Ubel said. "Instead, the advice you get could depend on whether your doctor is thinking about what you should do, or instead thinking about what he or she would do in your situation."

More information: *Arch Intern Med.* 2011;171[7]:630-634.

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