

# Patients more prone to complain about younger doctors

November 30 2017, by Steven Reinberg, Healthday Reporter

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(HealthDay)—Patients apparently are more likely to complain about

younger doctors. Case in point: ophthalmologists.

A new study of more than 1,300 ophthalmologists at Vanderbilt University in Nashville found that as the age of these doctors increased, [patient complaints](#) decreased.

"In a time where increasing attention is being paid to aging physicians and mandatory screening for cognitive impairment, the patient's voice can be a powerful tool for understanding performance," said the study's lead researcher, Dr. William Cooper. He's a professor of pediatrics and health policy at Vanderbilt's School of Medicine.

"Therefore, if a physician suddenly has a change and increase in the frequency of patient complaints against a backdrop of colleagues who typically have fewer complaints, then that person may warrant further evaluation," Cooper said.

The study couldn't pinpoint why patients complain more about younger doctors, Cooper noted.

However, ophthalmologist Dr. Michael Repka has ideas as to why older doctors receive fewer complaints.

With age, he said, comes experience that helps doctors interact better with their patients. Repka is a professor of ophthalmology with Johns Hopkins Medicine, and vice chair of clinical practice at the Wilmer Eye Institute in Baltimore.

"Less experience means that you might say things that you wish you didn't say, as you knew not to say 10 years later," he said, adding that people learn from their errors.

Also, patients might see older doctors as more experienced and

knowledgeable, and thus are less likely to complain about them, said Repka, who wasn't involved with the study.

A doctor's ability to manage patients does get better with age, he said, but younger doctors might have an edge when it comes to current medical practices.

Still, Repka said, all doctors—regardless of age and in all areas of medicine—get complaints. "I don't think this is particular to ophthalmology," he said.

"Learning about why patient complaints happen can improve the patient care experience for both the doctor and the patient," Repka added.

For the study—designed to gauge whether the age of a doctor affected the number of patient complaints—Cooper and his colleagues collected data on 1,342 attending ophthalmologists or neuro-ophthalmologists from 20 [health care organizations](#) participating in Vanderbilt's Patient Advocacy Reporting System.

The eye doctors all graduated from medical school before 2010 and ranged in age from 31 to older than 70.

The investigators found that the rate of patient complaints, registered from 2002 to 2015, decreased as physicians got older. Over the span of the study, the [complaint](#) rate gradually increased overall, but with steeper increases for younger [doctors](#).

"We should give a voice to [patients](#) who have concerns about the care they receive," Cooper said. "They can give us important information to guide safety and quality."

The report was published online Nov. 30 in *JAMA Ophthalmology*.

**More information:** William Cooper, M.D., M.P.H., professor, pediatrics and health policy, Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, Nashville, Tenn.; Michael Repka, M.D., vice chair, clinical practice, Wilmer Eye Institute, and professor, ophthalmology, Johns Hopkins Medicine, Baltimore; Nov. 30, 2017, *JAMA Ophthalmology*, online

The U.S. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services has more information on [patient complaints](#).

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Citation: Patients more prone to complain about younger doctors (2017, November 30) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-11-patients-prone-younger-doctors.html>

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