



## Here are some tips for finding the right physician

By LORI JOHNSTON / For the Journal-Constitution

**G**oing to the doctor is a task most people dread. But what if you don't know who to see?

Although plenty of information is available online about physicians' education, board certification and malpractice suits, the search for a nonspecialist that you can count on to diagnose, treat and handle everything from the flu to a physical to the potential of something more serious still can be frustrating.

"Finding a doctor can be so hit-or-miss," said Patti Crenshaw, a registered nurse who directs callers to Northside Hospital's physician referral line to three doctors who are affiliated with the hospital.

She gets calls "all day, every day" from folks who have moved to metro Atlanta, who have new or no insurance, or who have turned 65 and found their doctor doesn't take Medicare.

Not too long ago, people had a physician for life, said Dr. Samantha Collier, chief medical officer of HealthGrades, a Colorado company that provides online ratings and profiles of doctors, hospitals and nursing homes.

But things have become more complicated.

Fewer primary care physicians, family practice physicians and internal medicine doctors are in the selection pool due to a physician shortage.

"They're having a hard time finding primary care doctors, period. There are fewer U.S. medical school graduates going into those fields," says Dr. Davis Liu, a family physician in Sacramento, Calif., and author

of the upcoming book "Stay Healthy, Live Longer, Spend Wisely: Making Intelligent Choices in America's Healthcare System."

The number of doctors training in the United States to be internists has dropped from 54 percent in 1989 to 27 percent in 2003, he said. The biggest reason: Specialists make more money.

Patients and doctors also are more mobile these days. And so is the insurance, with employers often switching to more cost-effective plans, forcing patients to find new doctors that handle minor illnesses and practice preventive medicine.

"At the same time, more and more individuals are being forced to pay more and wondering as they leave, are they getting what they're supposed to be getting," Liu said.

When the new search begins, a frequent complaint is the wait for an appointment.

"When we changed insurance companies last year, I called because they designated me a primary care physician. There was a three-week wait to even get to see the doctor," said Angela Resos, a Lawrenceville mom and middle school teacher.

Faster walk-in options, that are open late and on weekends as well, are increasing, including Minute-Clinics, staffed by nurse practitioners at drugstores, and Health-e-Station, a Peachtree City center where you can have a video conference with a doctor.

Some folks still desire a doctor to not only treat seasonal bugs, but also keep an eye on cholesterol and other health concerns. If that's what you seek, patients, physicians and registered nurses offered a checklist for searching for your go-to physician.