

Examine doctor before first visit

By **LORI JOHNSTON**
Cox News Service

Going to the doctor is a task most people dread. As bad, though, is not knowing who to see.

Although plenty of information is available online about physicians' education, board certification and malpractice suits, the search for a nonspecialist you can count on to diagnose, treat and handle the flu, a physical, or the potential of something more serious can still 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 because of 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 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 insurance, with employers often switching to more cost-effective plans, forcing patients to find new doctors who 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 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 centers at which you can have video conferences with doctors.

Some folks still desire a doctor to treat seasonal illnesses, and to keep an eye on cholesterol and other health concerns.

If that's what you want, patients, physicians and registered nurses offered a checklist for searching for your go-to physician.

Know who to call. You'll rarely hear the term "general practitioner" these days. Primary care and family practice doctors, who see both children and adults, and internal medicine doctors, who see those usually at least 16 to 18 years old and older, are the choices.

Determine if you prefer a female

or male doctor, and if you want a solo practitioner or someone who is part of a group.

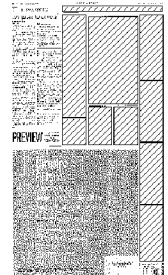
Find out who is on your insurance plan. Having that list is a good starting point. Determine which doctor has multiple locations or offices near your home. Also, know the hospitals where they have staff privileges — usually found by looking online or calling the office — to make sure it's near where you live.

Another option is to ask a specialist you are already seeing to handle your general medicine needs, said Michael Dailey with Infectious Disease Services of Georgia and a Medical Association of Atlanta board member.

Get word-of-mouth referrals.

Ask co-workers, other parents, or people who share your religious beliefs for recommendations, said Sandra McVicker, senior vice president of patient care services and chief nursing officer with MCG I Health in Augusta, Ga.

If you know people who work in the health care community, get their impressions.



Call the doctor's offices to investigate. How fast you can get an appointment is a major factor. If you're being told the wait is long, take the initiative and ask if anybody has canceled that day, said Robert Kaufmann, an internal medicine physician with the Kaufmann Clinic in Atlanta.

Ask the staff about evening and weekend hours. Find out what happens when it's 2 a.m. and you're sick and in need of a doctor.

"You really get a good idea by their responses whether it's a positive environment that you're going to," McVicker said.

Dr. Samantha Collier said physicians should be willing to make time for you to visit and interview them, at no charge. If they say no, cross them off the list.

Do background checks. Web sites offer information about physicians. Look to see if they received their training from a U.S. medical school, if they're board certified, how long they have been in practice, if any disciplinary actions have been

filed or malpractice settlements awarded.

Certification shows the additional and ongoing training doctors have undertaken, experts say. Only six out of 10 doctors nationwide are board certified, Dr. Davis Liu said.

Use the age or years out of medical school to help guide you, said Collier, whose site, <http://www.healthgrades.com>, provides that and other data, for a fee.

You may want a younger physician if you feel you can relate to them better, or an older physician who has more experience, she said.

Determine the potential for a relationship. Observe whether the doctor is listening to you. Are they focusing on you, making eye contact, without interruptions?

"I worry that doctors sit at computers and almost don't look at the patient," Dailey said. "They're sort of entering data as opposed to seeing how the patient says something and reacting to that, to figure out what is going on."

Make sure the person is knowledgeable about any chronic illness

or health concerns. Ask how comfortable they are treating it and its symptoms or reactions, Collier said.

And let them know if you expect to receive test results, even if there's nothing wrong. Some doctors assume there is no need to call if everything is OK, she added.

Kaufmann also advised asking what opportunities are available for communication, such as a physician's e-mail, blog or Web site.

Consider their style. Does the physician talk to you in a way that's like a partnership versus talking down to you?

"I think most patients now don't want that Marcus Welby, paternalistic, 'Oh, just do what I'm telling you because I know best' (mind-set)," Collier said.

Ask if they will welcome you back if you choose to get a second opinion on an issue.

"Some physicians and health care professionals in general think they can take care of everything," McVicker said.

The Rx for doctor visits

GETTING FACE TIME

Doctors say there are ways to ensure you will see them.

"I hear that all the time: 'I want a doctor who will talk to me and will spend time with me,'" nurse Patti Crenshaw said. "Patients are wanting a lot of personal attention, and they want to be able to speak with their physician and want to be able to know that their physician will be able to spend time with them."

When you call for the appointment, ask if you will be able to see the doctor. You typically should be told upfront whether you will see the doctor, nurse practitioner or physician's assistant, Dr. Michael Dailey said. Be clear about your expectation. "You can't be shy about it," Dr. Robert Kaufmann said. "You've got to say, 'I want to see the doctor that day.'"

There is no reason why a doctor can't come in and have at least a brief conversation with you, patient care expert Sandra McVicker said. "You need to speak up and say, as a patient, this is my expectation," she said. "We're trusting our lives and our care of our children, our parents and ourselves to these individuals."

But if you want to get in quickly, you may have to be willing to see the nurse practitioner or physician's assistant.

Otherwise, "You have to be willing to wait," Kaufmann said.

MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR VISIT

Before you go to your first primary care physician appointment, you may want to have a checklist of health issues you would like addressed. If you check Web sites like the National Institutes of Health's Medline Plus site at <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus>, you'll find information about physical exams and other important topics.

WHEN IT'S TIME TO BREAK IT OFF

You've identified a primary care doctor, and may even have visited the office once or twice while sick. But you're not happy with the care.

First, tell the doctor that, Kaufmann said.

"I tell them, 'If something makes you unhappy here, I wish you would tell me.' A lot of times the doctor doesn't know what's going on," he said.

But if you've addressed those things and are still unhappy, it's time to go. Doctors don't need notification you will not be seeing them, Kaufmann said.

"For me personally, if I had to think about it, I'd be going somewhere else. The fact I had to think about it would make me concerned," Dailey said. "For the most part, you should expect that the doctor should be there when he's with you, that he should be paying attention."