



We regret that the legibility of this clipping is reduced due to the imperfect printing by the newspaper.

Help! I need a doctor!

By LORI JOHNSTON
Cox News Service

GOING TO THE DOCTOR IS A TASK MOST PEOPLE DREAD. But what if you don't know whom to see?

Although plenty of information is available online about physicians' education, board certification and malpractice suits, the search for a non-specialist 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.

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.

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 who handle minor illnesses and practice preventive medicine.

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

Faster walk-in options and clinics that are open late and on weekends are increasing, including MinuteClinics, staffed by nurse practitioners at drugstores, and Health-e-Station, a Peachtree City, Ga., 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.



Take these steps

before choosing

a family physician

online

ALASKA'S STATE MEDICAL BOARD WEB SITE offers a professional license search for Alaska health care professionals:

www.dced.state.ak.us/occ/pmed.htm

BEFORE YOU GO to your first primary care physician appointment, you may want to make a checklist of health issues you would like addressed. Visit the National Institutes of Health's Medline Plus site for information about physical exams and other important topics:

www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus

1. Know whom 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 usually see those at least 16 to 18 years old and up, 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.

2. 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 which hospitals have staff privileges — usually by looking online or calling the office — to make sure it's near where you live.

3. Get word-of-mouth referrals.

Ask co-workers, other parents, people who share your religious beliefs whom they recommend. If you know peo-

ple who work in the health care community, get their impressions.

4. Call the doctors' offices to investigate.

How fast you can get an appointment is going to be a major factor. If you're being told the wait is long, take the initiative and ask if anybody has canceled that day. 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 can determine if it's a positive environment based on their response.

5. Do background checks.

While public and private Web sites offer information about physicians, some may cost money and may be inaccurate. Look to see if physicians 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. You may want a younger physician if you feel you can relate to him better or an older physician who has more experience, she said.

6. Determine the potential for a relationship.

Observe whether the doctor is listening to you. Is he or she focusing on you, making eye contact, without interruptions? 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. 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. Also ask what opportunities are available for communication, such as a physician's e-mail, blog or Web site.

7. Consider their style.

Does the physician talk to you in a way that's like a partnership vs. talking down to you? Ask if she will welcome you back if you choose to get a second opinion on an issue.

8. Getting face time

Doctors say there are ways to ensure you will get to see them. When you call for the appointment, ask if you will be able to see the doctor. You typically should be told up-front whether you will see the doctor, nurse practitioner or physician's assistant, and be clear about your expectation. But if you want to get in quickly, you may have to be willing to see the nurse practitioner or physician's assistant.

JASON BENAVIDES / The Charlotte Observer