

# GREAT MEDICAL CARE

The Handbook for Making Your Visit to the Doctor Better



Steve Feldman, MD, PhD  
Founder, [www.DrScore.com](http://www.DrScore.com)

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1	Follow up	29
Responsibility	2	Treatment	30
What a great medical experience looks like	6	Know your doctor's office policies	35
Finding a good doctor	8	Ask if the office has a website or e-mail newsletter for patients	37
Educate yourself ahead of time	11	Want a second opinion?	40
Making the appointment	13	Billing	41
Preparing for the visit	16	Office visits with children	43
My Family Medical History	18	Office visits with older parents	45
My Medical History	19	Feedback	47
My Medication List	20	What do you want in a medical visit?	49
My Current Problem List	21	Acknowledgements	50
Arrival at the office	22	About the author	51
Process through the visit	24		
End of visit	27		

We all hope our interactions with health professionals will lead to great medical care, but too often we feel disappointed. This book tells us how we can improve the interaction and make the most of our doctor visits. Don't leave home without reading it! This book could save your life.

**Joe & Terry Graedon**  
**The People's Pharmacy**

# INTRODUCTION

Medical care is critical to our health and well being. Advances in medical care over the past century, paralleling advances in other sciences, have been profound. Medical care has moved from the realm of magic to a proven science. The transformation has changed the role of the physician largely from holding patients' hands while nature took its course to one in which the physician marshals an incredible wealth of scientific knowledge and technology to change the course of nature.

It seems that often something is lost in the physician's new role as a technocrat. The mystic healer provided patients a sense of being cared for that had benefits aside from that which technology now provides. The ideal physician complements the technological wonders of medicines, imaging and surgical procedures with the caring that healers previously relied upon as their primary treatment. As a result, our relationships with our doctors should be both personal and professional.

When we visit the doctor, we expect to get accurate diagnoses, effective treatments and helpful suggestions for maintaining our good health. We also expect to be cared for. Whenever we use any service, we expect, at a bare minimum, to be treated courteously and respectfully. Our expectations with medical care can, and should, be higher than for other services we regularly use. We should expect technically great medical care. In addition, we should expect respectful, caring treatment. The purpose of this book is to help us get that care.

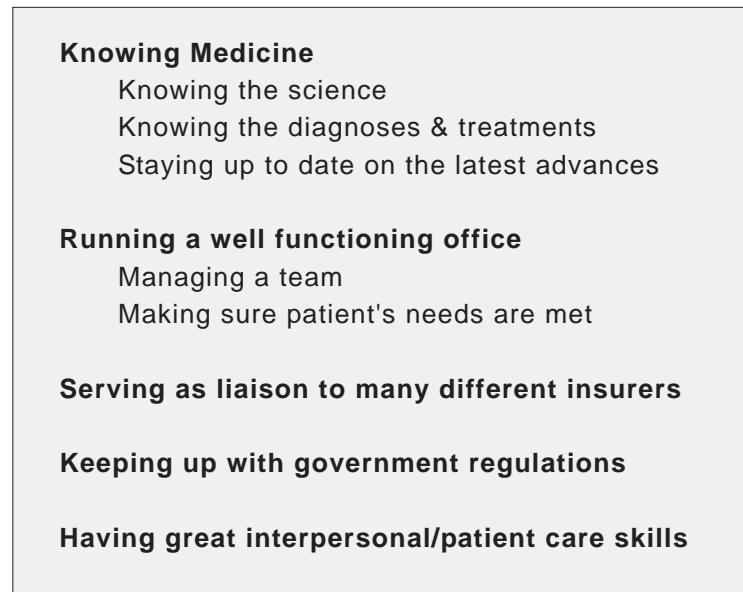
# RESPONSIBILITY

Whose responsibility is it to make sure things go right at a medical office visit? It's the doctors' responsibility, of course. Doctors are responsible for their patients' health and satisfaction. Doctors hold themselves to extraordinarily high standards. In an analysis of patient satisfaction data from the online doctor rating website, [www.DrScore.com](http://www.DrScore.com), the average doctor's patient satisfaction score was over 9 out of 10.

Giving patients a great doctor's visit should be the goal of every doctor. Doing so is the result of a multidimensional effort (figure 1). A core responsibility is giving technically top-notch care. Doctors spend a minimum of 10 years, often much more, learning the sciences underlying medicine and the basics of their craft. This is followed by a lifetime commitment to keep up with advances in medicine. Keeping abreast of medicine is so ingrained in doctors that it is not at all unusual to see doctors who've retired from active practice participating in continuing medical education.

However, giving patients a great medical visit involves a lot more than medical knowledge, and in some areas you can provide feedback and be helpful to your doctors. There are office personnel issues, varying insurance contracts, and extensive government regulations. Above all, there's the need to engender trust and cooperation between the patient and the physician. Medical care is a partnership. You and your

Figure 1: Doctors have complex responsibilities in giving patients great medical care



doctor share the same goals: enhanced well being, cures of diseases, control of chronic conditions that can't be cured, and prevention of future illness. Neither you nor your doctor can achieve those goals without the help of the other.

You can expect your doctor to give you a thoroughly great medical care experience.

However, even though it is the doctor's responsibility to give you great medical care, you have a role to play, too. You can affect the quality of your experience. We only have real control over ourselves. We should look for the things we can do to achieve our aims, whether it's medical care or any other interaction we have with other people. This book will give you tools that you can use to enhance the quality of your doctor visits.





# WHAT A GREAT MEDICAL EXPERIENCE LOOKS LIKE

Even doctors get sick. I wanted to establish a relationship with an internist to help keep me well and to rely upon when I got sick. My internist, Dr. Mary Lyles, is a jewel. When I call to make an appointment, the scheduler does her best to accommodate my schedule. When I arrive at Dr. Lyles' office, I'm greeted warmly by her reception staff. The waiting room isn't fancy, but it is clean and well kept. I've never spent much time there anyway. Shortly after I sit down, a nurse comes to fetch me, measures my weight and blood pressure, and escorts me to the examination room. She gives me a gown to change into and tells me how to signal that I'm ready to be seen.

Dr. Lyles comes in with a big smile on her face. She seems happy to see me. She isn't rushed. She asks me how things have been going. She does a very thorough examination, then discusses with me what lab tests I should have done and why. When it comes to testing and medications, she describes to me the latest research that has been done and considers my personal and family history in planning what we should do. When she does a lab test, I get a postcard a few days later with a handwritten note from her with the results and what they mean.

Dr. Lyles basically walks on water. But she doesn't know everything. If I have

Tip: It's comforting being cared for by a doctor you trust.

an illness that requires a specialist, she refers me efficiently to another excellent doctor. When I've needed surgery, she has helped coordinate the care.

I have complete faith in Dr. Lyles and trust her judgment. When she prescribes treatment, I'm confident doing as she asks. I look forward to my annual visits to her office. This is the type of doctor visit you should anticipate and expect to have with your own physicians.

# FINDING A GOOD DOCTOR

You may be wondering how you can find one as good as mine. Years ago, I asked other people who they would see, and that helped me find a great physician. Word of mouth is still a valuable tool. People who are happy with their medical care are also usually happy to share their good fortune.

Internet resources have become available that make it easier to find out about other patients' experiences and to share your own. DrScore.com is a website that you can use freely to find out basic information about physicians in your area.

The doctor ratings on DrScore.com provide a window for understanding the disconnection between stories you may hear about "bad doctors" and the dedication doctors have for their patients. Consider a doctor with a score of 9.0 out of 10. That doctor is doing a pretty good job of satisfying patients and isn't a "bad doctor" from a patient satisfaction standpoint. But if you look at the individual scores of that doctor, you wouldn't find that every patient rated that doctor a 9. More likely, 19 out of 20 gave the doctor a 9 or 10, and one out of every 20 or so gave the doctor a one or zero. Patients who give their doctor a score of zero certainly did have bad visits, but it doesn't mean all the doctor's patients are unhappy or that the doctor is a bad doctor overall.

Doctors need to take responsibility to make sure every patient encounter is the best that it can be. Not only does the technical quality of the care need to be wonderful, the doctor also needs to pay attention to other factors that make an office visit great.

**Tip: The average doctor's patient satisfaction score is a lot higher than most people think.**

The waiting room has to be tidy, signage should make clear that the practice is concerned about patients (and not their wallets), the waiting time should be reasonable, and the visit shouldn't be rushed.

There are two factors that can destroy patients' satisfaction: long waits and rushed visits. When patients are kept waiting a long time, patient satisfaction suffers. The patient may likely feel that he or she is seeing an uncaring doctor. Yet it may be that a very caring doctor had a couple of patients earlier in the day who required special attention and who needed unexpectedly long visits. If patients aren't informed as to why the doctor is running late, their long waits may make them feel like their doctor doesn't respect their time or care about them.

Every patient should get enough time with the doctor, not just the patients who need special attention. Your doctor should not short-change you, even if he or she is running late. But a doctor may hate keeping patients waiting, and so even very caring doctors may at times feel pressured to catch up in order to keep their patients from waiting so long on a day when things got backed up.

Even though the doctor may be doing it because they are trying to help patients, the doctor may mistakenly compound the problem of a long wait by giving a patient a short visit. The combination of a long wait and a short visit can make even the most caring doctors seem completely uncaring. Caring doctors don't make this kind of behavior a habit.

**Tip:** It may seem counterintuitive, but the doctor that sometimes keeps you waiting a long time may be an especially caring doctor



# EDUCATE YOURSELF AHEAD OF TIME

One way to have a better medical experience is to educate yourself. If you educate yourself ahead of time, you'll be in a better position to discuss issues of diagnosis and treatment with your doctor. You will be better prepared to participate in treatment planning.

The Internet provides a host of great patient education resources. Among the best of these are patient advocacy group websites. Organizations like the American Heart Association, American Diabetes Association, Arthritis Foundation, Lupus Foundation of America, the National Psoriasis Foundation among others are patient-focused groups that offer terrific educational materials. People are often concerned about the quality of information posted on the Internet, but one can have confidence in the educational materials produced and posted by patient advocacy groups.

These organizations go to great lengths to make sure their information is up-to-date and unbiased. In fact, they often provide people with the mechanisms for contacting other patients who have faced similar circumstances. If you have a chronic illness, joining a patient advocacy group may be the single most helpful thing you can do.

**Tip: Patient advocacy groups are a tremendous resource for patient education**

## RESOURCES TO NOTE:

One way to determine if a patient organization is legitimate is to see if it is a member of the **National Health Council**. You can learn more about the National Health Council at [www.nationalhealthcouncil.org](http://www.nationalhealthcouncil.org). Their website lists patient advocacy group members at <http://www.nationalhealthcouncil.org/aboutus/membership.htm>.

One of my very favorite medical information resources is the **Medline Plus** service ([www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus)) of the National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health. Medline Plus provides detailed, trusted patient information covering the gamut of medical conditions and their treatments. There is free access to a medical encyclopedia and links to many other helpful resources. There are also links to videos of surgical procedures. The information is unbiased and carefully vetted.

If you use [www.DrScore.com](http://www.DrScore.com) to rate or find a doctor, you may have noticed that it provides links to a variety of other online resources. If you are having trouble identifying a patient advocacy group related to your condition, you can search a list of these organizations at [www.drscore.com/advocacy/list.cfm](http://www.drscore.com/advocacy/list.cfm).

Another online resource for patient education material is [www.Vivacare.com](http://www.Vivacare.com). Vivacare provides information on both diseases and treatments. Some doctors use Vivacare to provide their patients an online library of patient education materials.

Another of my favorite resources is the People's Pharmacy ([www.peoplespharmacy.com](http://www.peoplespharmacy.com)), offering information about drugs and alternative treatments.

# MAKING THE APPOINTMENT

Appointments for medical care can be tricky. Much of medical care is unpredictable. While physicians do try to set reasonable appointment times, some patients may take longer than expected to see. You may end up waiting. I hate waiting, but I understand that doctors can't always know how much time they will need to spend with each patient. I want to see a doctor who would take extra time with me when I need it and who would drop everything when I need unexpected special attention. If you feel that way, too, you'll probably need to be willing to wait sometimes for routine care when other patients need unpredicted special care.

It's probably best to make an appointment at a time when your schedule is flexible and when an unexpected wait won't stress you out. In order to avoid waits, it may be best to get an appointment at the beginning of the day or right after lunch. Usually the first appointments in a clinic are on time because there aren't unexpected delays caused by earlier clinic patients' needs. Unfortunately, even the first appointment of the day can be disrupted if something unexpected like an emergency call to see a patient in the hospital happens.

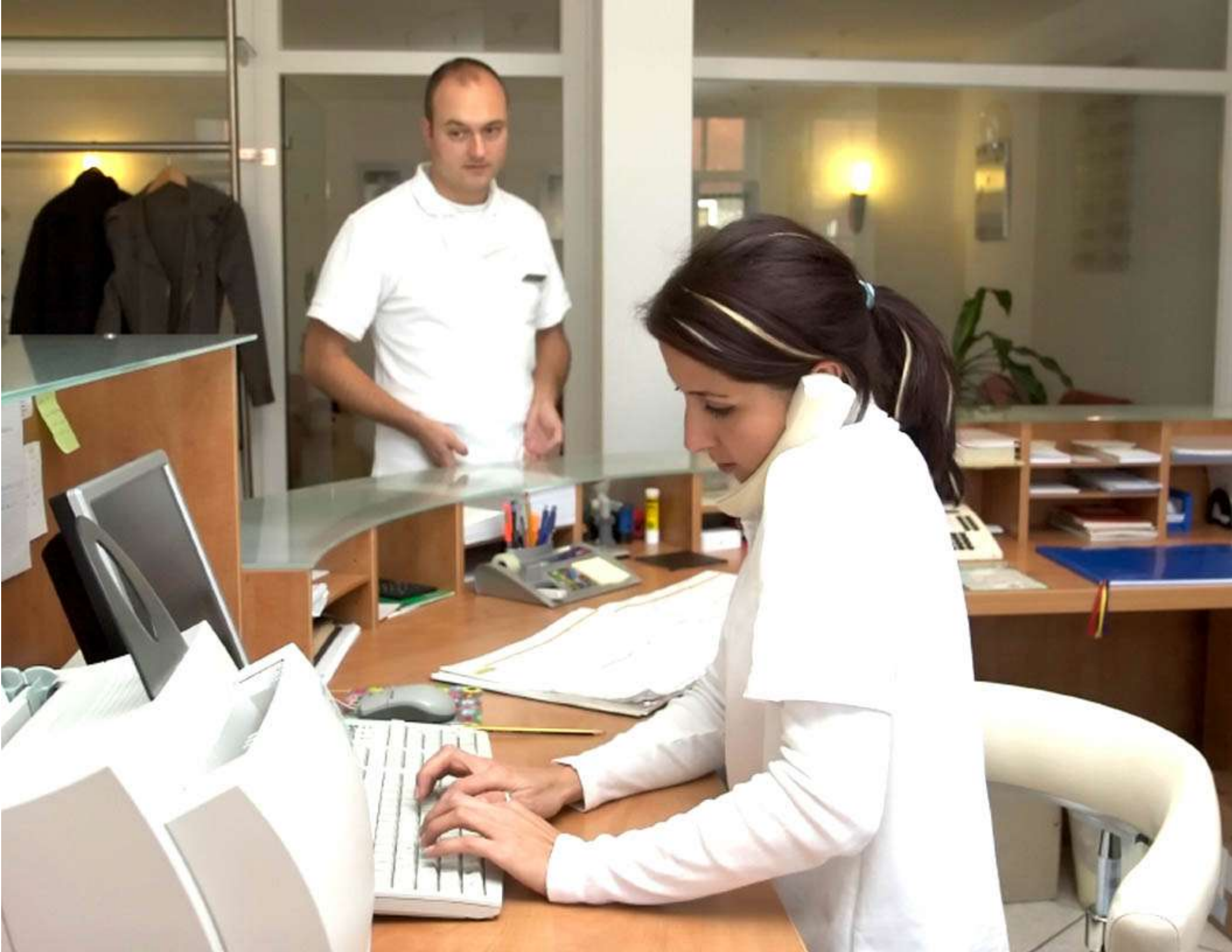
The job of the appointment staff in a physician's office can be busy and difficult. At times, it is a stressful job dealing with patients who are in pain or otherwise ill and who need to be seen even though the schedule is already full. Nevertheless, the schedulers should treat you politely, cheerfully and respectfully.

**Tip:** The doctor's first appointment of the day is the one most likely to be on time.



If, however, you find that long waits to see your doctor is a consistent pattern, you might discuss this politely before or after your visit. It may be that the office staff is not properly calculating the average time it takes to see a patient and may be over scheduling, despite the best of intentions. Feedback is important.

Just as you should speak up when "service" is not what you hope for, you should also show appreciation when things run smoothly. This is a basic principle: people respond to appreciation. Letting the scheduler know you appreciate their efforts on your behalf will encourage them to provide you good service. In any interpersonal situation, a thank you goes a long way. Personally, I think thank you notes are an underused, underappreciated tool.



# PREPARING FOR THE VISIT

Now it's time for the visit. There may be a lot of information that could help you have a better visit. Keeping this information organized by making a list, or two, may help.

What to bring with you:

- Past illnesses and their dates
- Past surgeries and their dates
- Health issues that run in your family
- Known allergies
- List of medical problems you want addressed
- Questions for the doctor
- List of symptoms you've been feeling
- List of medications you are currently taking, including dosing information
- Questions or concerns about medications
- Your actual medication containers

First, past history is particularly important for a first visit with a new doctor. It would help to have lists of past illnesses and their dates, past surgeries and their dates, and health issues that run in your family. Letting your doctor know about any known

**Tip: Bring a list of your problems and your medications to all your doctor visits.**

allergies is also critical. You can use the tables that follow to help organize this information. Or, you can keep track of the information on your computer and print it out for doctor visits. There are downloadable versions of the tables at the [www.DrScore.com](http://www.DrScore.com) website.

It's also important to bring a list of medical problems you want addressed. It's easy to get a little flustered at the doctor's office and forget some of the reasons for your visit. By listing your problems, concerns and questions, you will be that much better prepared. It's best to put the most important problems first to give the doctor more time to focus on them. Also include any symptoms you've been feeling.

Another important list is the medications that you are currently taking. Even better, bring the medications with you to the doctor's office. For each medication on your list, include how often you were told to take the medication and give an assessment of how often you actually do take the medicine. Also, it's important to let the doctor know any concerns you have about the medications, so write that down, too.

Bringing your medication containers to the visit is helpful for a variety of reasons. First, the doctor can find out exactly what medications you are on. Second, you and the doctor can assess how much of the medication you are taking. Finally, if refills are needed, the doctor will know exactly what drug and what dose to refill.

## FAMILY HISTORY

	Illnesses	Age at Death
Father		
Mother		
Father's Father		
Father's Mother		
Mother's Father		
Mother's Mother		
Brothers, Sisters or Other Close Relatives		

## MY MEDICAL HISTORY

Illnesses		Procedures/Surgery	
Illness	Date of Onset	Procedure	Procedure Date
		Allergies	
		Medication	Type of Reaction

**CURRENT MEDICATIONS**

Medicine

Dose and Frequency


**PAST MEDICATIONS**

Medication

Reason for Discontinuation


**CONDITIONS/ILLNESSES/SYMPTOMS**

Condition	Onset, Severity, Character, Modifying Factors	Addressed

Other Questions and Concerns	Addressed



# ARRIVAL AT THE OFFICE

When you arrive at the doctor's office, you should expect to be greeted warmly and respectfully. If you aren't, it may be because the office staff was having a bad day and is under even more stress than normal. Do your best to stay upbeat. Again, determine whether this is a one time incidence or a regular occurrence. If the staff is less than cordial on an ongoing basis, then you need to discuss the matter with your doctor. In the course of treating patients, doctors cannot always attend as closely to their staff as they might like. If a staffer is having a personal problem which is being reflected in his or her work, than perhaps there needs to be a meeting between the doctor and the staffer. This is important, because the staff plays a major role in the patient experience.

When you arrive at the office, make sure the receptionist knows you have arrived. Different offices have different ways they handle the check-in process. If you are asked to wait, it is appropriate to ask how long the expected wait is. If you are waiting and feel like the staff may have forgotten about you, do check with the receptionist.

The doctor's waiting room should be a comfortable place. If it isn't, it's good to let the doctor or staff know. You will be doing them a favor. You can do this with a note after the visit or by giving anonymous feedback at [www.DrScore.com](http://www.DrScore.com).

If you don't want to feel frustrated if there is a wait, consider bringing a book

Tip: Bring whatever you need to be productive in case there's an unexpected wait at the doctor's office.

or some work to do. I bring my computer and love it if the office provides wireless Internet access. Some offices are equipped, while others are not. Using a cell phone is ok, but it may be best to take it to a quiet corner or use the phone just outside the office. If you do step out, make sure the staff knows where you are and that you will hear your name if it is called.

# PROCESS THROUGH THE VISIT

At a great medical office, the doctor and their staff will keep you informed as to what is happening and what will happen next. If you ever feel unsure of what is going on or what is supposed to happen next, ask somebody! If you don't know if it is time to put on a gown or even how to put on the gown, just ask. If there was an issue that was on your mind but that hadn't been addressed, don't forget to ask about it. Having each issue on your list and checking them off is the best way to assure that nothing is forgotten.

Things may not always go as you hope. It may be as simple and as totally frustrating as the doctor not listening. What can you do? Ask the doctor to listen. But do be thoughtful in how you confront doctors or others. People may be naturally defensive. They may be easily threatened and often are inclined to retaliate or escalate conflict, particularly when they are under stress (and a medical practice-though it is a wonderful thing-is often stressful). The doctor may be writing down notes on your visit and may not want to break his or her train of thought. He or she may be trying to determine which medication is best. Sometimes you need only to be patient and hold your questions until he or she is able to give you the full attention that you deserve.

**Tip:** When you are feeling unsure about anything during the visit, ask your doctor or their staff about it.

When requesting a change in the care you are experiencing in the doctor's practice, just like in most areas of life, it's typically advantageous to do so in a non-threatening, positive way. For example, even the smartest, most technically adept doctors may not have the best people skills. They may be distracted easily or have difficulty making eye contact. That doesn't mean the doctor isn't attending to you, but it may seem that way. If the doctor isn't listening or doesn't seem to be listening, saying "you're not listening" may invite anger and defensiveness. On the other hand, giving a positive statement like, "I know you are listening to me, Doctor, but when you look down at the floor like that it makes me feel like I'm not being heard." This kind of well meaning feedback is more likely to be appreciated and result in the desired change. It is also a gift to the doctor who truly does want to give patients the best possible medical care experience.

If you don't feel comfortable making the request face-to-face, you can send a note, complete an in-office survey or go to [www.DrScore.com](http://www.DrScore.com). The important point is to communicate how you are feeling with your doctor in some way as close to the incident as possible.

**Tip: People tend to respond best to positive comments.**



# END OF VISIT

The end of an office visit, like the landing of an airplane, is a critical time. The doctor will give you his or her best advice on how to take care of yourself or treat your illness. Make sure you have written instructions for what to do.

## Important Things to Remember:

- You can take notes.
- You can ask the doctor for written instructions.
- The doctor may also have preprinted brochures from patient advocacy groups that have helpful information. The written information doesn't have to be extensive.
- At a minimum, you'll need the diagnosis, the treatment, and any special issues that you should know related to the treatment.

The details of medical care are common knowledge for the doctor, but they aren't for you. The doctor will know exactly what you are to do. He or she may tell you exactly what to do and may think written directions aren't necessary. But, since the information is new to you, it's very easy to forget the details.

If you didn't get the written instructions you need, ask the doctor or one of

**Tip: Get treatment instructions in writing.**

their assistants for them. It may be best to do it in a way that doesn't put them on the defensive. You might say, "I appreciate the great advice and care you gave me today. I want to make sure I use the medications correctly. Could you give me the treatment plans in writing so I don't forget anything?" It's especially important when a doctor hands you a prescription to make sure you understand the instructions regarding how much medication to take and how often. This is written down on the prescription, but it can't hurt to double check to make sure that you have heard the doctor correctly and/or read the prescription correctly.

If you are interested, inquire about other resources to learn more about your condition. "Doctor, are there any other educational resources that you trust and think I should check out online to learn more about my condition or its treatment." By letting the doctor know that you value their expertise and that he or she has your trust, they will be appreciative and inclined to help you find such resources. If doctors hear from a few of their patients that these kinds of resources are helpful, they would be more inclined to proactively identify and tell patients about them.

# FOLLOW UP

The visit isn't really over at the end of the visit. You should expect to get the results of all your tests. It isn't good enough to get results only when there is a problem. Something important could fall through the cracks. If you don't get the result of a test that was done, call or write for it. Better yet, before leaving the office, make sure you know how the office intends to get your results to you.

If you use the Internet, ask if your results can be sent to you by e-mail. There are government regulations regarding transfer of medical information over the Internet. You may need to give special permission for e-mail communication. If the practice doesn't use e-mail to communicate results, have them send the results to your home address by regular mail or have them call you at a convenient time. If a practice that doesn't communicate test results regularly hears from patients that such communication would be helpful, the practice will be more likely to provide that service to patients in the future.

**Tip:** Make sure you know how you are going to get the results of your tests.



# TREATMENT

Your doctor should let you know what your treatment options are. If you know what treatment you want, let your doctor know. If you're not sure, ask the doctor what treatment they think is best. Most patients want to follow their doctor's judgment and advice but still like knowing what other options are. It's good to get written information about your treatment options. Having a written list of options will help you if you want to do some research of your own on the Internet or at the library.

Have you been thinking about "alternative" treatments? Alternative medicine refers to all the treatments that don't fall within the realm of conventional medicine. Typically, there isn't a lot of evidence to support the use of these treatments. If more evidence was available that such treatments were widely effective, they would likely be considered conventional medicine. If you've been thinking about using alternative treatments, ask your doctor about them. Many people wonder if diet will help their condition. For most diseases, don't be surprised if there's no medical evidence that diet helps. However, if you do find that a particular diet helps you, let your doctor know. Your doctor will be happy for you and will appreciate the information.

Are you interested in herbal treatment? Be careful. There's no magic in herbal remedies, and there's no such thing as a free lunch. If an herb contains some chemical that gave it beneficial medicinal properties, that chemical would be at least as likely to have side effects as any other medicine. If anything, there would be many

**Tip: Know your treatment options.**

more chemicals in an herbal remedy than in a well defined medication, so not only would you get the chemical that's causing benefit, but you'd also be ingesting all the other chemicals in the herb.

Another problem with herbs is that you don't always know what you are getting. With FDA approved medications, you are getting a well defined medication. FDA-approved drugs offer assurances of purity, don't have lot-to-lot variability, and have fairly well defined benefits and risks. We don't know everything about any medication, but we know a whole lot more about the safety of approved medications than we know about the safety of herbal products. With herbals, you generally don't have any of the assurances you get with FDA-approved medications. In fact, a small unscrupulous company can adulterate their "natural" products with real drugs. One company sold a spray-on zinc product that seemed to be a completely safe, almost miraculously effective product for psoriasis. It seemed too good to be true, and it was. Investigators found clobetasol propionate-the most powerful corticosteroid known to man-in the spray product. People had been using it on themselves and their children thinking that it was a "non-medical," natural and safe product.

There are many good resources for patients interested in complementary and alternative treatments, including the People's Pharmacy books and website ([www.peoplespharmacy.com](http://www.peoplespharmacy.com)), The National Center for Complementary and

Alternative Medicine ([www.nccam.nih.gov](http://www.nccam.nih.gov)), Dr. Andrew Weil ([www.drweil.com](http://www.drweil.com)), the Alternative Medicine Homepage ([www.pitt.edu/~cbw/altm.html](http://www.pitt.edu/~cbw/altm.html)), the Mayo Clinic ([www.mayoclinic.com/health/alternative-medicine/CM99999](http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/alternative-medicine/CM99999)), and the Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine ([integrativemedicine.arizona.edu](http://integrativemedicine.arizona.edu)).

**The Importance of Treatment Compliance:** Much research has been done on how well patients use their medications. Even patients who are terribly bothered by their disease often don't use medications regularly. When asked to report how well they used their medication, most patients said they used the medication more than they actually did. A few said they took their medication exactly as directed even when they almost never used the medication at all.

Being too scared to take a medicine is common. One reason it is important to trust your doctor is that it may affect how well you use your medications. Usually you will be confident your doctor is giving you the best treatment. Sometimes, however, something may not seem quite right to you. If you don't trust your doctor or have any doubt about the recommended treatment, talk it out with your doctor. If that doesn't leave you feeling trusting, talk some more. Finally, if that doesn't work, get a second or even third opinion until you feel comfortable with your diagnosis and treatment. Simply not taking a prescribed medication doesn't do either you or your

Tip: Come up with a system that helps you make taking your medicine automatic.

doctor any good.

You may wonder if you can trust your doctor's recommendation. Your doctor has done a lot to earn your trust. Doctors have to do a lot of studying in college to do well enough to get into medical school. Then medical school involves four more years of intense study. That's just the beginning. After medical school, doctors do 3 or more years of residency training (it can be 10 more years for some of the more demanding specialties). Doctors then dedicate themselves to continuing medical education for the rest of their career. Generally, it makes good sense to follow the doctor's recommendation.

Forgetting to take medication is also a common barrier to successful treatment. To get the most out of your treatment, create a system that helps you take your medication as directed. For my parents, this involves a ritual of putting the pills in a small glass in the middle of their plates on the breakfast table. For others, a calendar or pill box may be useful. Find a system that works for you.

However you end up taking your medication, be honest about it with yourself and with your doctor. Don't worry that the doctor will be disappointed or disapproving of how you use your medication. Your doctor will appreciate your openness and honesty about how you use your medicines and any concerns or problems you've been having with the treatment. By letting the doctor know what you have been

**Tip: Generic drugs are a good way to save money. Walmart and Target pharmacies offer a wide variety of medications for only \$4.**

doing, the doctor will be in the best possible position for advising you on what changes or other treatments would be appropriate.

Another barrier to treatment is the cost of medication. If the cost of medications is a concern to you, let your doctor know. There may be generic versions or other alternative treatments that are less costly. Walmart and Target store pharmacies have long lists of medications that cost only \$4 for a 1 month supply and \$10 for 3 months. Some companies offer medications at a reduced cost for patients who otherwise couldn't afford treatment. Doctors like giving their patients cost effective treatments and will normally welcome the opportunity to try to make your treatment as inexpensive as possible.

**Tip: Generic drugs are a good way to save money. Walmart and Target pharmacies offer a wide variety of medications for only \$4.**

# KNOW YOUR DOCTOR'S OFFICE POLICIES

Patients don't get sick or have questions just at the time of their office visit. It may be important to contact the doctor or get other medical care outside of office hours. Great medical care involves giving you confidence and assurance. You shouldn't be left feeling uncertain about what to do if some unexpected issue comes up. The doctor's office should have clear policies about visits, contact after hours, what to do in emergencies, and billing.

Get a written copy of those policies. If the office doesn't have one, let the office know that putting a FAQ together (a list of Frequently Asked Questions and their answers) would help you and the office, too. At a minimum, the information should include:

- The office hours of the practice.
- Who to contact if there's a question, or problem, regarding medications
- How to contact the doctor outside of normal hours
- Whether or not you can contact the doctor or practice by e-mail, and if so, when that is appropriate (it isn't a good way to communicate about emergencies)
- What to do if there's an emergency (usually the answer is to go to the Emergency Room at the local hospital)

**Tip:** Find out what you should do if you need help after hours.

- Some basic information about the practice's billing policies including who to contact if there's a question about or problem with a bill
- Which insurance coverage the practice does and does not accept

Some practices will supplement this information with some basic information about their doctors and other health care providers, information that may include where they went to medical school, what residency they attended, what special qualifications they have and even something about their family life. I find this kind of information helps me feel that I know the doctor better, giving me more confidence in the care I receive.

# ASK IF THE OFFICE HAS A WEBSITE OR E-MAIL NEWSLETTER FOR PATIENTS

Advances in science are occurring at an accelerated pace. The last hundred years have seen a dramatic evolution of our scientific understanding of the world. Even the last 20-30 years have seen changes so dramatic that our children probably would hardly recognize the world in which we grew up.

Medical discoveries are keeping pace with advances in other areas of science. What is true this week may not be true next week. There may be new protocols for the best way to treat blood pressure or heart disease, new guidance on what preventive or screening tests people your age should have, or new information about the medications that you are taking. You'll need to know if there are important updates to the information on medications you take or other medical guidelines concerning your condition.

That kind of information used to be difficult to communicate in a timely, cost efficient way. In today's electronic world, sending and receiving information is often as easy as pressing a button. Electronic contact systems are a great way to stay abreast of what's happening.

**Tip:** Find out what you should do if you need help after hours.



Some doctors already have electronic newsletters that they send to patients. These are a fabulous way for doctors to keep you up-to-date on changes in their practice and on general issues in medicine. For time sensitive, critical issues, e-mail can be a terrific way to rapidly inform patients.

Not all doctors have taken full advantage of the potential for these modern tools to improve communication with patients. Let your doctor know if you are interested in such communications. If doctors hear from patients that these tools would be helpful, doctors would be encouraged to make greater use of them.

**Tip:** Let your doctor's office know if you want to receive information from them over the Internet.



Rx

MEDICAL CENTER

# WANT A SECOND OPINION?

If you have a serious medical problem or need a major procedure, you may want to get a second opinion. If you ever feel like a second opinion might be a good idea, go for it! Your doctor won't mind.

Second opinions are good for doctors, too. Doctors like hearing that another doctor confirmed their thinking. Even more importantly, doctors like learning new things. Doctors love to know when they are wrong, as your health is far, far more important to them than a bruised ego (even if it doesn't always seem that way). If you decide a second opinion is right for you, your doctor should always be supportive. Second opinions are "win-win situations."

Your doctor can probably give you good advice on who to seek for a second opinion. If you like, your doctor's office may even help schedule the visit with another doctor in the same practice or with a doctor in a different practice. If for any reason you feel more comfortable getting a second opinion without speaking to your doctor about it, that's fine, too. Don't feel guilty and don't worry that your doctor will be unhappy about it.

Whatever happens at the second opinion visit, it's your choice as to whether your doctor gets a copy of the second doctor's notes and opinions. I encourage you to have the second doctor send the first doctor his or her notes, because it is good for your doctor to know the opinion of the other doctor. It can also be part of your ongoing medical record. But if that makes you feel uneasy for any reason, you can certainly choose to keep the second opinion confidential from your doctor.

Tip: It's always OK to get a second opinion if you like.

# BILLING

There is one main focus of medical care, one overriding aspiration of your doctor, and one reason the doctor spent so many years studying: to give you and other patients great medical care. There is another side of medical care, though, one that doctors often aren't particularly well trained or even interested in: the business side of medicine. Yet the business side is important, too, because it affects the medical care experience you have.

Billing and insurance issues can be a big pain for patients. Usually, paying for medical care isn't as simple as buying groceries or a new stereo. There can be all sorts of questions, doubts and procedures involving insurance coverage. This can be a huge hassle for patients. For doctors, taking care of patients is the fun, exciting part of their jobs. Most doctors have science backgrounds. They are intrigued by the science that underlies human health and illness. Doctors and their staff love helping people get well. That makes it fun to get up in the morning and go to work.

Generally speaking, doctors dislike dealing with business. But business is important. No one—not the patient, the doctor, or even the insurer—wants the billing to get in the way of great medical care. Medical billing is complicated. There are so many procedures, diagnoses and treatments. Insurers want it done right. They've developed complex computer formulas and systems to try to make sure that they pay for appropriate care. Not surprisingly, sometimes there are problems.

**Tip: Doctors care more about your health than they do about billing.**

When it comes to these billing issues, patience is a virtue and is much appreciated by all concerned. Communication helps, too. All too often, there's miscommunication and misunderstanding. The doctor's office should have clear policies about how much they can help with insurers. Some doctors take on all the hassles of billing insurers. Other doctors focus completely on the medical care and leave it to the patient to deal with their insurer. If you have a strong preference about who should interact with the insurer, it may affect your decision about which doctor to see. Ask about how insurance is handled when you first talk to the staff at a doctor's office. If you have a specific coverage plan from work, see if the doctor is part of the network or not.

There are hundreds of insurers. You can't expect your doctor to be an expert on the particulars of your insurance plan. Find out what your insurance covers. It is psychologically painful for both you and your doctor if you have expensive laboratory tests or x-rays done only to find out later that they aren't covered by your insurer, or worse, that they would have been covered if you had the tests done somewhere else or if your primary care doctor had ordered it instead of a specialist.

If paying is going to be difficult, let the doctor know. Above all else, doctors want to help their patients. They will often be very flexible (much more so than other businesses) when it comes to payment rates and plans. It is important, however, that you speak up and let the doctor know your concerns regarding payment.

# OFFICE VISITS WITH CHILDREN

Children present some special issues for medical office visits. Doctor visits can be a scary proposition for people of any age. A young child may be less understanding and more worried about a doctor visit than you are. Prepare your child for the visit. One way is by reading books about doctor visits together. If you like, you could also get some doctor office toys-like a stethoscope-and play doctor at home before the visit. If your child knows what to expect, he or she will very likely be less frightened.

Waiting to be seen is more of a problem when you're with your child than it is when you are on your own. When you are alone, you can quietly read a book if you have to wait for an appointment. Your child may not be so easily amused. Hopefully, your child's doctor will have an office waiting room that caters to children and that includes age-appropriate activities to keep them busy and entertained. If not, consider bringing something that keeps your child's attention. I hate to suggest it, but an electronic game that isn't too noisy may do the trick. You can also let your child's doctor know about ways to make their office more kid friendly.

Hopefully, you and your child will get to the examination room without a long delay. Your child may be very interested by the novelty of being in an examination room. The doctor's office shouldn't have anything dangerous lying around, but it's a good idea to make sure your child doesn't get into anything. Reading a book together while you are there may help keep your child occupied.

**Tip:** Be prepared to help keep your child occupied at their doctor visits.

When the doctor arrives, your child may react in a variety of ways. Stay calm and patient with the process. It may help to let the doctor establish a relationship with your child.

Many parents are even more concerned about the medications they give their children than the medicines they take themselves. If you have any doubts or concerns about the treatment plan, discuss them with your child's doctor. Get the instructions in writing. Then create a system to make sure your child takes his or her medication as scheduled. Kids respond so well to positive reinforcement. Giving your child a star or happy face sticker on a chart every time they take their medication may be a strong encouragement to help your child take their medication regularly.

With all the terrific immunizations available today to prevent serious infection, many of your child's visits could end with an injection. An injection is a big deal to a child, but isn't the end of the world. Project an image of calm for your child. You may be able to avoid some injections. For example, there's an inhalable flu vaccine (flu mist) that can be used by some people in place of a flu shot.

# OFFICE VISITS WITH OLDER PARENTS

As people age, their need for medical care increases. For frail patients, office accessibility becomes a concern. It may be hard to get close parking at a major facility. Such facilities may offer valet parking and/or wheel chair assistance.

Paperwork is an issue for patients who no longer make decisions for themselves. The doctor will need permission from the appropriate caretaker to do procedures on patients who are not capable of authorizing care on themselves. It's helpful to have permission in advance.

If the patient has multiple caretakers, the potential for miscommunication increases exponentially. Written instructions become all the more important. It's also important to know how to contact the doctor, or their office, should a caretaker have any questions.

If an elderly person is confined to his or her home, it's appropriate to ask if the doctor does home visits. Such visits are less common than they used to be, largely because the doctor won't have access to the specialized equipment available at the office. But if specialized equipment isn't needed, the doctor may be willing, perhaps even excited, to help by seeing the patient at their home.

**Tip:** Make sure the appropriate person has given permission if the doctor needs to do a procedure on a patient who isn't capable of making the decision for themselves.





# FEEDBACK

Medical care is a partnership. Throughout this handbook, there are suggestions for more effectively communicating with your doctor and their office. Communication is critical for making sure the doctor has the information he or she needs to take care of you.

Communication from you is also critically important for doctors to know how you perceive the care you are receiving. Without your feedback, doctors may not know what they can do to enhance your medical experience.

Take time to let the doctor know how things went. If you like, you can speak directly to the doctor or their staff to give them advice. You can write letters, too. Doctors love to receive thank you notes from their patients, so if things went well, let them know. If there was anything about the visit that was particularly good, let your doctor know, as that kind of positive reinforcement will make them do more of that in the future.

If things did not go as you had hoped, you can write about that, too. You'll probably get the best response if you frame your letter in a positive way. No matter how poorly things went, if you write your letter with the assumption that the doctor is well meaning and that you want to help them do better, you'll have a greater impact on how the practice performs in the future.

Many patients find the idea of giving their doctor feedback a little intimidating.

**Tip: You can give doctors completely honest, open, anonymous feedback at [DrScore.com](https://www.drscore.com).**

I don't blame them, as people depend on their doctors for important health issues and don't want the doctor to think ill of them. Feedback can be given completely anonymously. I created [www.DrScore.com](http://www.DrScore.com) to help empower patients to give doctors feedback and thereby help doctors give patients great medical experiences. DrScore is a great way to give doctors feedback-both positive and negative-to help make your upcoming medical visits, and those of other patients, that much better. If your doctor isn't already listed on DrScore, you can add them in.

Don't be afraid to give your doctor advice on how to do a better job. When you give doctors feedback, you are giving them a gift, as your feedback helps the doctor do what they most want to do: give their patients great medical care. You are also helping other patients, and any changes the doctor makes in response to your feedback helps you at your next visit.

**Tip: The feedback you give your doctor-good or bad-is a valuable gift.**

# WHAT DO YOU WANT IN A MEDICAL VISIT?

We should expect to get great medical care at our doctor visits. The care should be technically accurate, meaning we are given the right diagnosis and the optimal treatment plan. In addition, we should be treated respectfully, and we should be cared for.

Doctors are human, and we wouldn't want it any other way. There are pressures on doctors, both internal and external, to be excellent technically. While becoming a physician takes years and years of learning, the time spent teaching the service aspect of the profession is limited. It isn't as sexy or important as anatomy, physiology, biochemistry, bacteriology, immunology or pathology. Yet great medical care without great service isn't great medical care.

Patients play the central role in the medical care experience. There are things you can do to prepare yourself and to help enhance your medical experience. Communication with your doctor is critical. Don't hide things about your health, your behavior or your fears and concerns.

While medical care isn't rocket science, it is like rocket science in that it is scientifically complicated. In addition, medical care is a people business. It involves many interpersonal issues. As in other interpersonal areas, the relationship between you and your doctor will be improved by openness, positive thinking and mutual expressions of appreciation.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author thanks the [www.DrScore.com](http://www.DrScore.com) team for their commitment to enhancing patients' medical experiences. This book benefited from Rich Mintzer's excellent editing. Thanks, Richie!

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven R. Feldman, M.D., Ph.D., is Professor of Dermatology, Pathology and Public Health Sciences at the Wake Forest University School of Medicine in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. He directs the Center for Dermatology Research, a health services research center funded by a grant from Galderma Laboratories, L.P. He received a Presidential Citation from the American Academy of Dermatology in 2005 for his psoriasis education efforts and received one of the AAD's highest awards, the Clarence S. Livingood Lecturership, at the 2006 AAD Meeting.

Dr. Feldman's research team has focused on demonstrating the quality of medical dermatology services provided by dermatologists; defining the role of dermatologists in performing dermatopathology; assessing cost effectiveness of dermatologic treatments; and, most importantly, understanding the effectiveness, safety and cost-effectiveness of outpatient dermatologic surgery. Dr. Feldman founded the Medical Quality Enhancement Corporation and its [www.DrScore.com](http://www.DrScore.com) website. The site is designed to help patients give doctors feedback so that doctors can enhance the quality of care they offer.

His research studies into patients' adherence to their topical treatments helped transform how dermatologists understand and manipulate patients' use of topical medications over the course of chronic disease. Dr. Feldman was awarded an Astellas Award by the American Academy of Dermatology in 2008 for scientific research that has improved public health in the field of dermatology.

Good medical care is critical to our health and well being, but it often seems that something is missing in modern medical care. When we visit the doctor, we expect to get accurate diagnoses, effective treatments and helpful suggestions for maintaining our good health. But we also expect to be cared for, to be treated courteously and respectfully. Our expectations with medical care can, and should, be higher than for other services. In addition to technically great medical care, we should expect respectful, caring treatment. Dr. Steven Feldman, national award winning dermatologist and founder of the DrScore.com physician rating site, has written **Great Medical Care: The Handbook for Making Your Visit to the Doctor Better** to help us get that care. Great Medical Care will give you the tools you need to make the most of your doctor visits.

## GREAT MEDICAL CARE

The Handbook for Making Your Visit to the Doctor Better

Steve Feldman, MD, PhD

Founder, [www.DrScore.com](http://www.DrScore.com)

learn more online at [www.DrScore.com](http://www.DrScore.com)