On Being a Patient

On Being a 21st Century Patient

I confess: I was anxious on the ride over. I would be seeing a new doctor.

In a nicely appointed waiting room, with ample chairs, there was the usual paperwork to be done. Looking around, there were individuals just like me and some very different from me. One patient was doggedly staring at his legs. He made me a little uncomfortable, so I looked the other way. But, overall, I liked the atmosphere. It was a diverse practice.

They treated the insured and the uninsured alike, with an eye toward affordability and transparent fees. It had not been hard to get a timely appointment, and they had extended hours for those who needed to be seen early in the morning or after work. They accepted my low-cost insurance. My initial information was entered into the computer by the helpful and polite front desk staff. Ten minutes or so passed.

"The doctor will see you now."

I was taken by an upbeat tech to a cheery examination room with cityscape photographs on the walls. She asked some preliminary medical questions and then inquired whether she could get me anything. The room was small and had no windows, but it was bright and spotless, with a pleasant smell about it. It was just the right temperature, not too cold or hot. The floor was gleaming—I do so far as to say you could eat off it. The doctor entered the room within about 3 minutes and introduced herself. There was warm small talk as she washed her hands. She put me immediately at ease with her welcome and then her thoughtful questions (80% of the diagnosis is in the history they say). The doctor’s manner was unhurried. She did not interrupt.

There was eye contact.

There was no intrusive computer in the room; she offered her undivided attention.

There was sufficient time to communicate.

I next stretched out on the long examination table. Those things are always so uncomfortable. But with a thorough and gentle physical examination—and the therapeutic power of touch—I was feeling more and more at ease. And cared for.

Inspect.

Palpate.

Auscultate.

Contemplate.

Once the examination was completed and I was back down off the table, the doctor began to discuss her findings and recommendations. Doctor, of course, means "teacher," and she seemed to take that role seriously. She gently nudged me about my weight and the importance of exercise. I had been substantially underweight but had gained a bit too much in the past year. Too many bacon-and-egg Sundays; too many treats. This reminder provided some needed motivation to get back on track.

She explained in a reassuring manner the cause of my recurring upper respiratory infection accompanied by conjunctivitis and laryngitis and what could be done for it. Nothing too serious. That was a relief. She also said, "There’s no need for blood work today. More relief.

No other tests were suggested, nor any prescriptions. Dietary supplements would be enough. Discussion of prevention issues followed and then my least favorite part of the visit, a shot in the rump. It was, however, painless and quick. The doctor did it personally and in the very same room—no wandering around to find another room and encounter yet another clinician along which can often feel like an assembly line that stretches from the front desk to the examination room to the injection room to the checkout area and then to the laboratory.

Back in the waiting room, there was no patient satisfaction survey at the desk, but in the language of patient-reported outcome measures, the experience exceeded expectations. (In fact, almost amazingly, the next day the office called at home to ask how I was doing after the visit, how I had tolerated the injection and whether there were any questions.) There was a short wait for the after-visit summary while the note for the visit was entered, but that extra time was definitely a small price to pay for accuracy and clarity in the record and, most important, for having had my doctor’s full attention.

In the doctor’s office...

In the 21st century...

It can be done.

All told, including the car ride to and fro, I had been gone from home about an hour and a half. I made it back that day in time for lunch, Fancy Feast.

It made me wonder why everyone couldn’t have it as good.

(As told to the authors by Stella Snyder Sulmasy.)

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