

# Selecting a Physician

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*"The good physician treats the disease; The great physician treats the patient who has the disease."*

—SIR WILLIAM OSLER

Osler's words remind us that a doctor must focus his/her skills toward healing of disease and the promotion of health. The effective physician must also possess the knowledge and the skill to educate and motivate patients to achieve higher levels of wellness. In turn, being a wise consumer is a basic foundation for receiving good health care. Selecting an appropriate physician has become an important right and responsibility for people who believe they may be experiencing the late effects of polio. Once a physician has been selected, it is appropriate to take an active role in your diagnosis and treatment plan. You are the one who lives in your body. You are an expert, too.

## Finding Your Physician

Choosing a physician requires great care and thoughtful consideration. Asking the following questions will help.

- ◆ What is the physician's reputation? Talk to friends and acquaintances about their experiences. Try to get a feel for the level of medical care, time spent with the patient, and the physician's willingness to interact with the patient. Has the physician treated many people who had polio?
- ◆ What is the physician's location/availability? Considerations include distance from your home, office hours, on-call hours, after-hours and vacation coverage,

and hospital privileges. Is the physician's practice accessible to people with disabilities (parking, office entrances, examining tables, restrooms)? Are laboratory and x-ray services or rehabilitation team professionals' services located in the same or other convenient facility? How long must you wait for an appointment?

- ◆ What are the physician's qualifications? Check with your local medical society. You can specify what type of doctor you are looking for by sex, specialty, age, or location. Find out if the doctor is "Board Certified" or "Board Eligible." "Board Certified" means that he/she has several years of training in a specialty after graduation from medical school and has passed a national qualifying examination. "Board Eligible" means that the training has been completed, but not the exam. The local medical society can provide this information; however, these credentials do not guarantee competency. Other qualifications may include place of medical school or postgraduate specialty training, professional society memberships, and staff membership at well-recognized hospitals.
- ◆ Are the physician's services covered by your insurance plan and what are the fees? Ask if there is a "fee for service" office policy. This means that you are asked to pay for your visit at the time of the appointment rather than being billed. Determine if the doctor is a member of an HMO or other group health organization.
- ◆ What do you want and/or need from a physician? What is the type of problem you think

you have? Do you need an initial diagnosis or ongoing health care management assistance? Are you looking for a generalist or a specialist?

## Evaluating Your Physician

After your initial visit to the physician, review the following questions to decide if you and the doctor can become "working partners" in your continuing health care management.

- ◆ Is the physician's personality compatible with yours? Can you openly discuss your feelings and talk about personal concerns? Do you believe your doctor will stand by you, no matter how difficult your problems become?
- ◆ Does the physician seem sincerely interested in you and your unique problems as a polio survivor? Are your concerns considered seriously? Has your past history been adequately considered? Is the physician interested in you as a *whole* person — your inner self and your lifestyle, as well as your physical self?
- ◆ Is the physician willing to help you learn about your condition? Do you feel at ease asking your doctor questions that may sound "silly?" Does your doctor clearly explain the nature of your condition? Does he/she listen to you and answer all your questions about the causes and treatment of your physical problems, or is he/she vague, impatient, or unwilling to answer? Does the physician not only diagnose the problem, but take time to discuss specific treatment options such as changes in lifestyle, referrals for adaptive equipment, or choices in therapy, surgery, or medications?



## Medical Specialties

**Cardiologist** ... An internist who specializes in diseases and treatment of the heart

**Internist** ... A specialist in general internal medical diseases and disorders of the adult

**Neurologist** ... A specialist in the diagnosis and treatment of disorders of the nervous system

**Orthopedist** ... A specialist in surgical treatment for skeletal disorders (muscles, bones, and joints)

**Physiatrist** ... A specialist in physical and rehabilitative treatment of nerve, muscle, and bone disorders and their associated disabilities

**Pulmonologist** ... An internist who specializes in treatment of the lungs and respiratory system

**Psychiatrist** ... A specialist in treatment of emotional illness

◆ Is the physician familiar with the literature available on the late effects of polio? Has the physician had sufficient experience and/or involvement with post-polio patients for you to have confidence in his/her opinions? Is the physician willing to learn more about the late effects of polio?

◆ Is your doctor willing to refer you to others? Does your physician utilize the services of other health care professionals needed to manage polio's late effects – i.e., physical and occupational therapists, nurses, brace makers, and/or social service and counseling personnel? Does the physician use a team approach in his/her practice? Will your physician discuss referral to post-polio specialists?

◆ Is the office staff cordial and attentive to you? Does your doctor answer your letters or telephone calls promptly? Are you generally kept waiting for long periods of time when you have an appointment? ■

## Boundary Issues

BASTA! (Boston Associates to Stop Treatment Abuse) has a website ([www.advocateweb.com/basta](http://www.advocateweb.com/basta)) that addresses treatment abuse. The following information is reprinted with BASTA's permission.

*Is There Something Wrong or Questionable in Your Treatment?* contains an extensive list of behaviors that could alert you to boundary issues which frequently result in poor or abusive treatment or health care.

Estelle Disch, PhD, explains, "If you are currently in a treatment that doesn't feel right, and/or if several of the items describe your treatment, I suggest that you find a consultant who does not know your current practitioner in order to assess whether or not the treatment is viable. If you have been in a treatment relationship that didn't feel good to you, this list might help you identify what went wrong.

"The list is not exhaustive. It is intended to offer examples of the kinds of behaviors that very often accompany poor treatment. Although most items apply to psychotherapy, some can apply to other kinds of health care, pastoral counseling, or clergy relationships. There is a section on touch-based health care (including body work) at the end of the checklist.

"Certain items in the list might not always reflect poor treatment. For example, it might make sense to break ties with abusive people in your life, and a practitioner might support this with your best interests in mind. If, however, the practitioner is encouraging you to break ties with all your close relationships with the sole purpose of making you extremely dependent on

him or her, that is very likely to be poor treatment.

"Good, boundaried psychotherapy, pastoral counseling, addiction counseling, bodywork, medical practice, etc. should always be oriented to your emotional and medical needs and not to the emotional needs of the practitioner. Practitioners who are lonely, need attention, have deep unresolved problems, and/or who lack good training in boundary issues are apt to do marginal or poor treatment. There are good practitioners, and you have a right to be treated by them."

The site also offers suggestions as to what actions you can take if you suspect abuse in the section called *After Sexual (and Other) Malpractice – What Can You Do?*

*Are You in Trouble with a Client?* contains a series of questions for practitioners/physicians to review to determine if they are crossing any boundaries. ■

These checklists (©1990, 1992) are available at [www.advocateweb.com/basta](http://www.advocateweb.com/basta). If you do not have access to a computer and would like a printout of the questions to assist you in determining questionable treatment, send a self-addressed stamped envelope to International Polio Network or contact Estelle Disch, PhD, BASTA! (Boston Associates to Stop Treatment Abuse), 528 Franklin Street, Cambridge, MA (Massachusetts) 02139 (617-661-4667).

Basta! is part of AdvocateWeb, P.O. Box 202961, Austin, TX (Texas) 78720 ([www.advocate.org](http://www.advocate.org)), a nonprofit organization providing information and resources to promote awareness and understanding of the issues involved in the exploitation of persons by trusted helping professionals.