

# Patient empowerment...it starts with us.

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President



My previous articles have dealt with many of the changes that we as physicians have seen in medicine, legislative and otherwise, that have impacted how we provide care to patients. Now more than ever, patients will need to play a greater role in their own healthcare, changing how patients traditionally approached medical care. In addition to the fact that many patients have to pay more for their healthcare with higher deductibles and co-pays, we physicians have less time to spend with them, meaning that we have to be able to make the most of that time. It is therefore important that we are spending that time getting an accurate history and educating the patient on diagnostic and treatment options and not trying to figure out what the “little white pill” that they take for their hypertension is. Patients must therefore be empowered and understand their role in helping us help them.

There are still some barriers to true patient empowerment, however, and much of it hinges on lack of education and unrealistic expectations. It would seem that with the advent of the internet, patients would be more educated about their medical issues and, to some extent, this is true. But unfortunately the internet is also replete with medical misinformation as well. The media can also often distort or exaggerate medical information. Additionally, we live in an age where instant gratification is becoming the norm. We can pop a pod into a Keurig®

machine and have the beverage of our choice within a minute, stream movies to our living room, and get the answer to any question from the internet at any time on our smartphones. (We can even ask Siri if we don't want to type.) It should therefore be no surprise that some patients expect physicians to provide instant answers and quick fixes for their medical issues.

I see this regularly in my practice. One of the things that I love about my specialty (Allergy/Immunology) is that patients often come in feeling miserable and I know that I can help them feel better. That sense of gratification is what motivates many of us to do what we do. Unfortunately, their symptoms will return if they don't continue daily medications as prescribed, follow recommendations to reduce allergen exposure, or for those who are candidates, pursue

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allergen immunotherapy. While the latter can alter the immune system's response to allergens and significantly reduce symptoms over time, it is not a cure. Some patients seem skeptical to believe, however, that there is no magic pill or shot to cure them, despite my efforts to educate them.

Unfortunately, it is these unrealistic expectations that can lead some people to turn to non-evidence based alternatives for their medical treatments. We've all seen patients who are likely spending hundreds of dollars per month on herbal supplements or invest in other unproven therapies or

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procedures, believing that they are making a healthier choice. I'm sure many of us know of examples where there have been adverse outcomes, even if it is due to progression of the disease that wasn't being appropriately treated. A few months ago, there was an article in the *Arizona Republic* about a new local business that offers intravenous vitamin therapy that they claim can be used for "a variety of health and wellness needs". Their website promotes their establishment as a social environment to "get your drip...with your friends". Many of their customers probably feel that they are making an empowered decision for their health. The problem is, however, that they may forgo proven medical treatments. One customer, for example, said that he was going there to treat his thyroid disease and we can only hope that he doesn't end up with myxedema from lack of thyroid replacement.

A more poignant example of the unrealistic expectations that some have of medicine is that of the 12 year old girl that was pronounced brain dead after complications from a tonsillectomy in California a few months ago. Her family went to great lengths to have her transferred across the country to keep her on life support. She is so vibrant and full of life in her photograph that it is easy to see why it is difficult for them to accept such a terrible outcome from a very routine procedure. Some medical dramas may leave

some with the illusion that we have superhuman powers or were issued a magic wand along with our medical degree. Those of us with a medical background, however, know that expectations that she will return to be the way she was before the surgery are scientifically improbable.

In the end, patient empowerment is about education and it is our job as physicians who were trained to follow evidence based medicine to see to it that our patients are educated. We face constraints due to the changes imposed on us and that I have alluded to in prior articles, which take away

time that would be best spent educating our patients. Furthermore, issues that are often beyond our control, such as costs of medicines and treatments can make it difficult for patients to comply with our recommendations. We must therefore rely on other resources to assist us in helping out patients. Patients must

be encouraged to use reliable resources when learning about their disease states and treatments. Reliable disease specific educational tools are available from a number of sources. In 2014, the Maricopa County Medical Society is working to add to available educational resources by including patient handouts in *Round-up*. These handouts, designed as a tear-out sheet in the magazine or downloaded from our website, can be printed, copied and distributed; they are intended to empower patients by providing information that allows them to best navigate the healthcare system, including educating on the costs of healthcare.

As the old saying goes, "knowledge is power". It is part of our job to ensure that our patients have the correct knowledge to make the best decisions in their healthcare. 

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