

## Do You Welcome New Patients?

A few weeks ago, I volunteered to help my 80-year-old mom find a chiropractor near her new home. (Dr. Steve Chance of Ft. Myers, Florida was her last, greatly missed chiropractor.) Mom fainted while we were on vacation. I made her promise to see a DC when she got home. She saw an MD instead and was tested, scanned and examined for stroke, carotid artery problems, high/low blood sugar and heart trouble. Her doctor concluded that a combination of exhaustion and 96 degree temperatures probably caused her to faint.

Since I was more interested in her finding a DC than she was, it was up to me. Her only requirement was that they be "on Highway 5" - not exactly my main requirement in a health professional, but since Mom doesn't like driving in new areas, I recognized that if it was difficult to get there, she just wasn't going to go!

I had some requirements as well. For instance, her chiropractor would need good communication skills. My mom assumes that professionals know what they're talking about and doesn't ask nearly enough questions to suit me. Insurance and Medicare frustrate her, so the staff would need to be well informed and able to explain things clearly. As for adjusting? I just hoped to find someone who actually adjusted their patients.

I wanted her to have a DC who would "direct the case." By that, I mean that the DC would not only tell her what's wrong, but also tell her what needed to be done to fix it. I wasn't worried about anyone talking my mom into anything she doesn't need. She certainly can say "No." I also wanted the chiropractor to explain Mom's responsibilities (stay, pay and refer) and make sure that she left the office with a clear plan of action. I don't think any of these things are unusual or unreasonable. It's what I'd want if I were looking for a new chiropractor.

I asked my mom to tear the "chiropractor" section out of her phone book and mail it to me. Armed with the *Yellow Pages* and our mutual requirements, I began the search by reading the display ads. One of the first things I noticed was that a surprising number of doctors have confusing office hours. One doctor was open five days a week and had different hours every day. No kidding. No wonder patients can't remember when you're there.

A few ads made me wonder just what it was they did in their offices. Some ads used so much jargon that one chiropractor needing another chiropractor might find it interesting, but not the average prospect. In still others ads, workers' compensation, auto accidents and sports injuries were featured so prominently that I assumed they weren't interested in other cases. One was so proud of his website (that would send my computer phobic mom running!) that he devoted 20% of a full-page ad to it. If I'm left bewildered by *Yellow Pages* ads, what is it doing to the average person? Where did they go to school? How long have they been in practice? Exactly where are they located (landmarks please!)? Do they accept assignment? These were things I was looking for. You don't need a giant ad to include these and other basic facts. I thought less than half of the ads were helpful to a prospective patient. No wonder my mother wanted me to decide!

I noted those ads that seemed like good possibilities and began to make phone calls. I called male, female, new and seasoned practitioners' offices. I asked whoever answered the phone simple questions like the ones above. Except for knowing where they were located, the majority didn't know or remember where their doctor went to school or what techniques they used! Perhaps they'd been warned about giving out too much information. With one exception, none seemed glad I'd called. It didn't take me long to realize that I'd have to talk to the doctor directly to get answers.

I wasn't interested in someone trying to impress me. I wanted to understand what was really going to happen if my mom became a patient. At each office I called, I made this request: "I'd like to know when it would be possible to talk with the doctor about my mother becoming a patient. If the doctor prefers to call me, I'd be happy to accept a collect call."

Again the response was disappointing. Staff people told me, "I don't think our doctor does that." (I suggested they take my name and number and ask the doctor.) "Have your mother come in and talk with the doctor." (Exactly what my mother wanted to avoid!) "We don't have time to do that. Our doctor is very busy." (Not for long with that attitude.) Of the nine offices I called, I eventually reached the doctor in three of them. The doctor answered in one office; the CA checked with the doctor in another and told me when to call back; and in the third, the doctor returned my call 36 hours later.

Two of the three doctors "waffled" when I asked whether they would have a treatment plan of some sort for Mom. After prompting and asking if they made recommendations for care, they agreed they would tell her "something." None mentioned a report of findings. After restating that my mother was 80, had fallen the week before, and had negative results to all medical testing, I asked whether they would take x-rays. One gave a definite yes; the others were noncommittal. (Come on, for Pete's sake! This is a Medicare patient!) One stated several times that if Mom didn't respond within two weeks, she'd be "referred out" for testing (Testing? We just did that!) This was making me a tiny bit crabby.

I was surprised at the lack of interest at most offices. I hear doctors worry about being too "pushy," but in this case, I was the one getting pushed away! Was it the staff person, or a reflection of the doctor? Most doctors/offices I know would have suggested a time for me to call back or volunteered to return my call. I'm always hearing about how hard it is to get new patients. Maybe this is why. I hope that these responses were not typical, but I fear they are.

So, my dear doctors, here's the point, if you haven't already figured it out. How tough is it to become a patient at your office? Does your ad give prospects what they need to know? Does your staff sound like they welcome new patients? Does it sound easy to get started? Does the prospect feel overwhelmed with jargon and procedure rather than care and concern?

Ask someone who is not involved in your office to call your place and ask for information a prospective patient would want. You may be in for a surprise.

*Editor's note:* Looking for a chiropractor? ChiroLocator at ChiroWeb.com is a directory of 61,000 DCs. You can search by the doctor's name, by city, by country/province or by zip code.

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