How to Find a Doctor

It used to be that if you were looking for a doctor, you would just ask a family member, friend, or neighbor. Now, people are turning to the vast amount of information on the internet to find physician that’s right for them.

“For years, people have been searching for information on doctors and healthcare quality, but it was tucked away in hospitals,” says Dr. Rick May, vice president of Accelerated Clinical Excellence for HealthGrades, a source of physician information and healthcare outcomes. “Now much of that information is available to anyone with a click of a mouse.”

Although there are many online resources providing information on doctors, it is critical that patients understand what they are researching and try to determine the reliability of the information.

“I think it is more important because there is so much information available,” says Carmen Carpenter, chair of the Bachelor of Health Sciences program at South University. “With the internet, anyone and everybody can advertise and we don’t know for sure the reliability of that information. Anyone can post anything they want.”

The first step in choosing a doctor is finding out if they are licensed to practice. Each state licenses doctors, so patients can check with state physician licensing boards.

“Generally, the most reliable place is the state regulatory agencies,” Carpenter says.

When choosing a doctor, a patient should also make sure the doctor they are researching is board certified and specializes in the field that the patient requires care. Doctors might be board-certified in one area of medicine, but actually practicing in a different area of medicine.

“Find out if the doctor is board certified in the specialty that you are looking for,” Carpenter advises. “You have to look for specifics.”

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Board association websites, such as the American Board of Medical Specialties and the American Board of Physician Specialties, can offer information on whether the board itself is certified.

The internet has taken away some of the mystique that once surrounded medicine. The public has not only become more aware of medical conditions but also their healthcare options.

In the past 20 years, there has been a shift in patients’ attitudes – in their willingness to question their care, May says.

“What we see now is more of a cultural change – people want to be more involved in healthcare decisions and with that, they want to be well-informed,” he says. “They are now saying ‘show us the quality.’”

May adds that many doctors are pleased to answer the call for increased transparency in healthcare and patient-physician relationships.

“Doctors are people who are extraordinarily good at achieving goals, but without objective feedback about their performance, they don’t know where they stand, or where they need to improve,” May says. “They want to do a good job, but no one has taken the time to give them the objective information they need to guide their performance.”
He says HealthGrades not only informs patients, but helps physicians and hospitals understand, improve, and communicate the quality of the care they provide.

Users of the HealthGrades.com website can find doctors by name, area of specialty, and location. From there, they can view a physician’s profile to find information on their specialties, state licensing, years of experience, office locations, education, awards and recognitions, and a background check. The site also offers ratings on the hospital the doctor is affiliated with and patient experience ratings.

Despite offering plenty of data, collecting and providing information on healthcare quality has been a challenge for HealthGrades. Patients not only want to know doctors’ general and background information, but many also would like to know the outcomes, mortality rates, and other details about the care they provide.

“We are working with hospitals and physician groups to collect that information,” May says. “We want to follow patients throughout their care.

“The information being put out is just in its infancy,” he continues. “In the next five years or so, we will see thousands of times more information available about physicians and quality.”

Carpenter recommends that those searching for information about the quality of health provided by doctors and hospitals look carefully at the ratings criteria.

“Look at the parameters they are using to make their decisions,” she says.

“The ultimate message is that the patient really needs to be active,” May says. “The more you put into finding the right doctor, the more you get out of it.”