

# Faculty and Employee Assistance Program Newsletter

## Navigating the Healthcare System

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People rave about it, people complain about it, but all of us need it at some point. Knowing how to interact with the healthcare system is an important skill to develop and like other skills, requires some education and thoughtful attention.

Healthcare is a large, complicated **system** with its own language, social norms, and rules of behavior just like schools, corporations, and other industries. There are policies, norms, established attire, social pecking order, accepted behavior and expectations. The plain fact is that the better the consumer understands how the system works, the better he or she can negotiate the system effectively. Knowing the bottom line on how the system works will help you enter it, adapt to it and use it effectively. Care providers are constantly looking at quality factors, trying to improve systems, and be more customer friendly and the consumer has a role in this system as well.

**In healthcare, navigating the system is largely about efficiency, expectations and communication.**

In all areas of healthcare practice the physicians, nurses and allied health staff are by and large, highly motivated to provide high quality and thoughtful care. They are also **very busy**, have multiple tasks underway, and have multiple demands coming at them essentially ALL the time. So what does this mean for you, the consumer of healthcare?

**As a consumer, don't assume anything:**

- Hopefully the healthcare provider will have read your record before s/he walks in for the visit but do not assume s/he knows or remembers every detail of your situation.
- Be thankful you are asked multiple times about your medications and allergies, and even your name. It is for your own good.
- Do not assume that someone from the physician's office or team will follow-up with you. They might and yes, maybe they should, but remember they are very busy. Advocate for yourself. Call the office to follow-up on your labs or get a final answer on something if you have not heard back.
- And finally, do not assume the health care team understands your home situation and the level of support or help you have or do not have. Speak up.

In inpatient settings, the length of stay in the hospital is brief and is based on the primary diagnosis and any complications the patient may have. People do not stay in the hospital to "get well," to feel better, or for social reasons such as inadequate help at home. Planning for discharge starts at or before admission to the hospital. Understanding the purpose and flow of healthcare can help you have **reasonable expectations**, because when consumers understand the framework, there is less frustration. Conversely, healthcare providers need to listen and recognize that consumers usually do not know how the system works and need input and guidance to be reasonable in their expectations.

**Communicating** with your health care providers...remember the first point? They are very busy. You can make communication more effective in the following ways:

- Be focused in your communication. Why are you seeking health care today? Write down ahead of time the 1-2 items you specifically want addressed and have it at the top of your notes page. Bring up the important questions or concerns first.
- Make notes and take notes. Do take paper and pen with you to medical appointments. Be proactive by making notes before the visit, identify what your focus of the visit is, and take notes on what is said to you.
- Be concise: do not start your healthcare story back when you were a child and work forward. Stay on point, give the healthcare provider the main points, and let them ask questions for clarification. DO give them all the necessary information: how long has the symptom been there? What symptoms do you have (all of them)? And what have you already tried?
- Be assertive – It is OK to say “I have two more questions” and proceed to ask them. It is OK to say you “need clarification”, It is OK to say “I don’t understand.”
- Designate one family member as the healthcare contact in inpatient situations if several family members are involved. This streamlines the flow of communication and lessens the problems. Have questions and answers filter through this family spokesperson as much as possible. The staff want to provide clear and accurate information but this is difficult to do with multiple family members over time.
- Find out when the physician usually comes around the inpatient unit to see your loved one and plan to be there if possible.
- Keep a log of your medical care: diagnoses, medications tried and reactions to them, procedures and outcomes, healthcare provider names, timeframes of treatment, etc. This can help you stay focused and clear.
- Be nice. Common courtesy and respectful communication are always more productive than being demanding or expecting the worst. Express your appreciation for the healthcare provider’s efforts whenever possible and remember they are people too.
- Health care is delivered by a team of professionals. Try to determine which medical specialties are involved and seek information directly from those professionals, ie nurses, physical therapists, social workers, nutritionists and others. The physician does not have to always be the one to fill you in on everything that is being done.
- Become part of the team yourself by identifying the people on your team and by being focused and thoughtful in your interactions.
- Be persistent if you believe you are not being taken seriously or not *heard*.
- Determine who you want the medical staff to communicate with on your behalf and sign the Release of Information forms early in the process to ensure that can happen. This will make it easier on your loved ones who are trying to advocate for you and enhance the care you receive.

In summary, Healthcare is a large and complicated system that the patient enters. To be the best patient you can, try to understand how it works and adapt to this complicated system--then advocate for yourself assertively and respectfully.



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