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## Finding a Way to Ask Doctors Tough Questions

By LAURA LANDRO

Waiting to see his dermatologist about a skin rash, John Barnett heard the doctor sneeze loudly before he came into the exam room. The Seattle-area retiree says it took all his courage to ask, "Are you going to wash your hands before you examine me?"

Despite efforts by advocacy groups and others to empower patients, challenging a doctor or nurse on whether they are correctly doing their jobs remains downright intimidating. Signs and posters in hospitals urge us to "Speak Up" if we see a potential medical error. More nurses wear buttons these days that say "Ask Me If I've Washed My Hands." But even the most outspoken and assertive among us may suddenly turn meek when we are sick or vulnerable in a hospital, fearing that our treatment will suffer if we antagonize caregivers.

"It's all too common for patients and family members to remain silent when they suspect something is wrong or improper in their care," says David Shulkin, chief executive of Beth Israel Medical Center in New York City. "Patients and families must be willing to leave their comfort zone and speak up, and every institution has to think about how they can get patients more engaged in their own care," he says.

More and more institutions are making the effort to help patients take an active role in caring for their own health.

Kathy Todd was hospitalized in 2007 with complications before and after the premature birth of her daughter at a Seattle-area hospital. She found herself reluctant to ask nurses for anything she needed. She endured hours of pain one day when a nurse didn't administer pain medication because she didn't ask for it.

"I was sick and dragging myself down to the [neonatal ICU] to see my baby, and in that crisis situation I became very meek and took whatever they said and questioned nothing," says Ms. Todd, who is 31 years old. But after getting to know nurses, she says she realized she was being too reticent. She later agreed to go on a patient advisory board at the hospital and help new mothers through the experience. "You can't expect every

patient who comes through to have the presence of mind in a crisis to ask for what they need or raise questions," she says. "It's up to the doctors and the hospital to set the tone and the culture to give people the bravery they need."

A growing number of institutions are taking steps to help. At Beth Israel, 53 physicians contributed chapters to "Questions Patients Need to Ask," a new book edited by Dr. Shulkin on issues ranging from how to ask about infection-prevention measures to what to do if a technician drawing blood misses a vein too many times -- after the second try, the book suggests, ask for someone else. The book is available online for \$19.99.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's new Aligning Forces for Quality program is providing \$300 million in grants for community programs designed to get consumers to take an active role in their own care, especially those from certain racial and ethnic backgrounds. The Puget Sound Health Alliance, a coalition of employers in Washington state that received a grant, has set up a public Web site with a list of questions patients should ask surgeons, including whether they are following a state-endorsed checklist that includes checking patients' medication allergies and determining the risk of blood loss.

There is some evidence suggesting that greater patient involvement can improve medical outcomes. For example, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation surveyed 600 patients with chronic illnesses in the Seattle area last year and found a link between how patients feel about their encounters with doctors and how well they adhere to their regimens. One finding: Among patients in treatment for depression who felt their medical providers treated them fairly, 90% took their medications regularly. But adherence to a regimen was just 60% among patients who said they feel they haven't been communicated with or were treated poorly.

"The culture around medicine is changing very quickly as patients begin to understand the full impact of medical errors and see that quality health care is not a given," says Bruce Siegel, a professor in the department of health policy at George Washington University who runs the Aligning Forces for Quality program. Many physicians are trained "to think of ourselves as little gods" and resist patients who question their authority, Dr. Siegel says. But "the more enlightened physicians are beginning to realize this could be a positive thing for health care."

The Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority, which tracks medical errors and recommends preventive measures, says research conducted in the state shows patients are increasingly willing to ask certain questions of their doctor. It says patients will seek a better explanation of something they don't understand or question the reason for a procedure or unfamiliar drug.

But patients are most reluctant to ask anything that might be viewed as confrontational, such as requesting that health-care providers confirm a patient's identity before a procedure or asking practitioners to wash their hands, the group says. Hand washing is considered the most important preventive measure against the spread of potentially deadly infections.

I had that in mind on a recent visit to a Florida emergency room after my husband cut his forearm to the bone in a fall. As the doctor approached him, I said: "I have to ask you to wash your hands, according to that sign right there." The doctor took umbrage, gave me a speech about washing her hands 15 times a day, then gave them a cursory rinse under the faucet. "You don't use the hand sanitizer gel in that dispenser?" I ventured. "I don't like that stuff," was her response. After that, the doctor donned gloves and sewed him up nicely.

For Mr. Barnett, the Seattle-area retiree, the request that the dermatologist wash his hands had a better outcome. He says the doctor responded, "Oh yes, I should," and went and did so. Mr. Barnett, 78, says he believes passivity with doctors is more common in his generation. He says the experience taught him the importance of speaking up when he feels uncomfortable about his health care. Mr. Barnett now volunteers as an advocate for people in nursing homes, and serves on a state advisory committee about preventing hospital infections.

Delia Chiamonte, a Baltimore physician who works as a consultant helping patients with serious medical conditions navigate the health-care system, says patients can be assertive in asking questions and challenging medical staffers without being offensive or confrontational. "Sometimes acknowledging the doctor's hard work can make them more interested in giving you what you want," Dr. Chiamonte says. One approach she recommends is to say: "Wow, you really seem to be working hard today. Thanks so much for giving me a few extra minutes to talk about my concerns."

John Clarke, clinical director of the Pennsylvania Patient Safety Authority, suggests that someone too intimidated to ask if a doctor or nurse has washed his or her hands can say, "I'm concerned about getting germs from another patient." But Dr. Clarke says patients have to be prepared to escalate their expression of concerns. "If you think something is truly dangerous, you just have to say 'Stop, I'm not supposed to get this procedure,' " he says.

Many hospitals make use of the "Speak Up" campaign launched in 2002 by the Joint Commission, the nonprofit group that accredits hospitals. The program provides free brochures and posters to hospitals urging patients to take a role in preventing medication errors, infections and wrong-patient procedures. The brochures, available at [www.jointcommission.org](http://www.jointcommission.org), provide lists of questions to ask medical practitioners, urging patients, for instance, to make sure doctors and nurses check their wristband and ask their name before administering medicine.

Mark Chassin, president of the Joint Commission, says hospitals also have to educate staffers about the importance of being receptive to patients who may fear speaking up. "Patients and families are usually sick, scared and anxious when seeking care, so [challenging a doctor] is not the same as beefing up your assertive self to negotiate on price when you are buying a car," he says.