



Health care disconnect: Lost in the myriad reform proposals for health-care reform are some of the more practical issues that patients confront daily with their 'team' of doctors. Can they feel our pain?

By Robert Lipsyte, USA TODAY, 2/20/08

I've decided to call a meeting of my personal medical staff, which includes a primary care doctor, an ophthalmologist, urologist, oncologist, gastroenterologist, cardiologist, neurosurgeon, dentist, dermatologist, audiologist, osteopath and podiatrist, all of whom I have seen recently, but never in a group. When I've got them together, I will ask the three key questions of this nation's — as well as my own — health crisis, questions as critical to ask doctors as politicians: Will you get past your partisanship to talk to one another, will you feel my pain and are your hands clean?

The health crisis that we all share — getting good, timely medical service and being able to afford it — is too big for me and my staff to solve. But the overall national plans that the presidential candidates propose will be useless unless they also help me get the answers to my questions.

Will you get past your partisanship to talk to one another?

Despite what we see on [House](#), [ER](#) and [Grey's Anatomy](#), where TV docs talk endlessly about their patients, real docs mostly talk about billing procedures when they get together. It's something they have in common. Medically, they are separated by their specialties. My ophthalmologist, gastroenterologist, urologist and podiatrist might as well be exploring different planets. While each is prepared to take heroic measures to save a specific body part, it's hard to get them to treat me as a complete system. I'm sincerely grateful to the oncologist for coming up with a chemo cocktail that knocked back a recent cancer recurrence. But I wonder if he had known me better, that I was a music lover, whether he would have prescribed the drug that damaged my hearing.

Doctors don't talk: Maybe under the present health care system, doctors don't have the time or the financial incentive to talk to one another more about their patients. Maybe they chose specialties so they could be in exclusive clubs and not have to talk to outsiders. Maybe we have to find ways to get them to meet and mingle. I'll vote for the candidate who nails that into a platform.

Will you feel my pain?

Thirty years ago, before an operation, a surgeon told me that I wouldn't feel a thing. I asked him whether he had ever gone under the knife? He stormed out of my room. These days, most doctors still don't really know what we go through, although there seems to be a movement toward greater understanding. There have been a number of articles and books, even a movie (the 1991 [The Doctor](#), starring William Hurt), in which the "wounded healer" becomes a more sensitive doctor after experiencing illness.

In an excellent new book, [When Doctors Become Patients](#), Dr. Robert Klitzman interviews 50 physicians with cancer, HIV and other conditions who typically have as hard a time as their patients do in dealing with illness and the doctor-patient relationship, though for different reasons: They have been conditioned to believe in the "magic" of their own superiority and have trouble operating in the alternative universes of a doctor's invulnerability and a patient's neediness. Klitzman, a Columbia University [psychiatrist who became depressed](#) after his sister was killed in the World Trade Center on 9/11, finds that most of his subjects seem to have become more empathetic to their patients, more willing to take a "we're all in this together" attitude toward treatment and make more of an effort to reduce patients' anxiety.

A new way of teaching: While I'm not against a health plan that requires doctors to get at least a little sick to qualify for their fees, I think medical school courses taught by doctor-patients, as Klitzman prescribes, can make a big difference in our condition. Politicians can make that happen.

Are your hands clean?

There are crooked doctors, as there are crooked politicians, but this question is a literal one. I think the toughest question to ask a health care provider about to touch your body is, "Did you wash your hands?" At one of my favorite hangouts, the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York, there are sanitizing dispensers everywhere, and staff members sometimes wear blue buttons with a germ in a target and the simple order, "Wash Hands."

It's well-known that [thousands of Americans die](#) every year from diseases contracted in hospitals. But most patients don't ask the toughest question because they are not comfortable enough with their doctors or the medical environment to do it in a friendly, non-challenging way, and they are afraid of causing antagonism. We need to be made equal partners in the system so we can talk freely. For all the policy wonk discussions about mandated care for all vs. affordable care, single-payer government systems such as Medicare vs. private policies, the heart of health care reform is about the doctor and the patient finding their way together toward compassionate care.

Even just thinking about all this gives me stress. I might just have to add a psychiatrist to my personal medical staff.

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