

The New York Times

Rating Doctors Like Restaurants

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Count us among those who would like to read a Zagat-like review of our doctors. We regularly check the company's popular guide to New York City restaurants for hints as to whether the food is good or the service is lousy — at least in the opinion of others who have dined there. So why not get some guidance as to how patients view their encounters with various doctors?

As Milt Freudenheim reported in The Times on Monday, WellPoint, a big insurance company, has teamed with Zagat to survey the attitudes of its subscribers toward the doctors they have used. The patients rate their doctors in four broad categories, indicate whether they would recommend the doctor to someone else and can add comments if they wish. The end result, once enough ratings come in, will be a composite score for individual physicians indicating where they rank on a scale from poor to extraordinary.

The idea of patient-based ratings has some doctors in a tizzy. They insist that patients are in no position to judge which doctors are best and that some patients may respond to glib charm rather than professional competence. That sounds much like the complaints we heard when students started rating their professors, yet many universities now factor student judgments into their evaluations of the faculty. The Commonwealth Fund, a pioneer in evaluating health care systems around the world, relies in part on surveys of patients' experiences.

And it makes us suspect that the doctors complaining aren't the ones who welcome their own patients' constructive complaints.

Who knows better than patients whether they have confidence in a doctor? Whether they like his or her bedside manner? Or find it easy or hard to make appointments? Or are dealt with on time or kept waiting for hours? Or find the staff helpful? These are the kinds of items covered in the Zagat/WellPoint survey, not anything to do with the quality of medical care provided.

A missing ingredient is Zagat's pithy and witty summaries of the comments, a hallmark of its restaurant reviews. WellPoint subscribers, the only ones who can view the comments, are not apt to learn that a doctor's "icy hands" and "crowded waiting room" made the examination "a downer." WellPoint will simply publish subscriber comments in full.