

Title of Document:

Understanding the Doctor-Patient Relationship

Overview:

This document contains the answers to many common questions and concerns people have about finding a doctor, developing a relationship to meet healthcare needs effectively and what rules govern the conduct of doctors in BC. Information comes from a variety of sources, including Peers, the College of Physicians and Surgeons of BC, and SCI-specific medical resources.

Few general practitioners have extensive knowledge of SCI and fewer will understand its impact on aging. Be prepared to help educate your doctor about what you need.

How can my doctor and I be partners in my healthcare?

Choosing a doctor is an important part of taking care of yourself. You and your doctor can form a partnership where you can learn from and help each other. In this relationship, you each have a job to do. Your job is to learn as much as you can about your own and your family's medical history, and to communicate this to your doctor. Talk openly to your doctor. Your doctor depends on you to tell her/him about your signs and symptoms. She/he needs your knowledge of when the symptoms started, what brings relief, what makes them worse, and what medications you are using or have used.

Your doctor's job is to help you take care of yourself by giving you the information you need to make decisions about your health. You depend on your doctor to help you understand why you feel the way you do and what your symptoms mean. Your doctor's role is not only to explain things in terms you can understand, but also to

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give you a correct diagnosis and the appropriate treatment and/or referral.

Doctors have a limited time to spend with each patient; you may only be able to discuss one issue at a time. Be prepared to discuss your concerns concisely but don't be afraid to ask for more time if you need it. They may not have an answer right away or may need to send you to a specialist.

How can I choose a doctor?

If you live in a larger community with lots of doctors, you have more options. Get the names of several doctors and interview them before making a choice. Think ahead of time about what you want in a doctor and what you want to know about them.

Consider asking the following questions:

- How long has she/he been practicing?
- Is she/he affiliated with a hospital? If yes, which one?
- Does she/he have expertise in any particular areas? If yes, which ones?
- Who covers for her/him when she/he is not available?
- Does she/he have time to adequately address your concerns?
- Does she/he return phone calls?
- Can she/he respect your values in treatment?

If you feel comfortable talking openly with your doctor about your health concerns, then you are on the way to developing a positive partnership with her/him. This will be especially important if you have a chronic disease or an ongoing disability and your relationship with her/him is long-term.

Doctor shortages mean that you may not have choice about which family doctor or specialist you see. That said, you do have the right to advocate for care that meets your needs.

Where can I go for more information?

The College of Physicians and Surgeons of BC (see info at the end of this document) lists all

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doctors registered to practice in BC, their contact and educational details, and any disciplinary action against them. The College no longer lists doctors accepting patients.

If you have trouble finding a doctor, try these tips:

- Sign up on the BC Health Connect Registry
<https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/health-connect-registry>
- Talk to everyone you know and ask them to talk to their doctor about taking you on. This is also a good way of ensuring that you get a good doctor.
- Call medical offices and see if they know of anyone who is available.
- Call your local health authority and ask for information about doctors who are accepting patients and ask if they have any programs for people without family doctors who have chronic illness or disabilities.
- Search online to find out if your community has a Division of Family Practice and contact them for information on any programs they have for “unattached patients,” particularly those with chronic illnesses or disabilities. An unattached patient is a person covered by MSP who does not yet have a family doctor.
- If you know of someone who is leaving town, ask them for a referral to their doctor.
- In the meantime, visit your local urgent care clinic, emergency room or walk-in clinic when you need care, and ask the attending doctor if he/she knows of anyone who is accepting patients. Call 811 to find a list of clinics in your area. Let the walk in or urgent care clinic know when you book that you do not have a family doctor and are looking for one.
- If you are going to a walk-in clinic, remember to request copies of reports, results or referrals. Walk-in clinics often do not keep patient files and may not be able to transfer your files to your new family doctor when you find one, so it's a good idea to try to keep copies.

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- Virtual visits are a good option for certain types of care, such as prescription renewals. See links at the end of this document for virtual care options.
- Consider whether you have any affiliations that might offer more opportunities for finding a family doctor, such as military veteran or military family status, or a spouse who is already attached to a family doctor, or indigenous status. Many post secondary schools have clinics on campus.

Is a physician obliged to treat a patient?

A physician is obliged to treat a patient if the patient has an established relationship with the physician and his/her failure to address an ongoing problem might be harmful (and/or when failure to attend might constitute abandonment); or delay in attending to a patient's problem might result in serious harm to that patient.

Can a physician conduct a "meet and greet" interview prior to accepting a new patient into his/her practice?

Like any effective relationship, a patient-physician relationship is built on principles of trust and honest two-way communication, which should be established at the first meeting. While a "meet and greet" meeting is deemed acceptable practice for physicians to get to know a new patient and learn of his/her health concerns and history, it may not be used as a means to select the "easy patients" and screen out those with more difficult health concerns, such as chronic disease. In addition, a physician cannot refuse to accept patients based on human rights issues, such as age, gender, marital status, medical condition, national or ethnic origin, physical or mental disability, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation, or socio-economic status. Any concerns in this area should be directed to the College of Physicians and Surgeons.

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Can a physician choose to stop seeing a patient?

There will always be some patient/physician relationships that, for whatever reason, simply do not work or become unproductive. Often the relationship ends because the patient no longer trusts the judgment of the physician or because of a difference of opinion, either with the physician or with his/her office staff. In these instances, either the physician or the patient may decide to end the relationship. If the physician decides to end the relationship, he/she is obliged to consider the patient's safety and well-being first.

The physician must ensure that the patient is not acutely in need of immediate care, and that he/she has been given appropriate notice to find another physician. While the College of Physicians and Surgeons advises physicians to provide a written explanation about the termination decision, neither the physician nor the patient is required to state the specific reasons.

What is the process for seeing a specialist?

In British Columbia, patients require a referral from a family physician, general practitioner, or another physician to see a specialist. This is a requirement of the provincial Medical Services Plan for authorization of payment for specialist services. In some instances (i.e. for elective surgeries or cosmetic procedures), specialists will see patients privately and without a referral from a family physician. However, in these circumstances, the patient will be billed and must pay the specialist directly.

In the case of an ongoing relationship with a specialist, a referral may not be needed for each visit; your specialist's office will let you know if another referral from your GP is required.

Are family physicians obligated to make referrals to specialists upon a patient's request?

No. A family physician is expected to use his/her medical judgment to determine if a referral to a specialist is necessary.

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Are physicians required to return patient's phone calls?

Many doctors are now choosing to do some appointments by phone. Let them know when booking if you are open to this option, but it will depend on the type of appointment you need.

Your doctor is not obligated to return calls other than for appointments.

Is a patient obligated to pay for a missed appointment?

Billing for a missed appointment is a matter that is left to a physician's discretion. Billing a patient privately for missing a scheduled appointment may be acceptable, assuming the patient has been forewarned of the physician's policy and the physician exercises judgment and compassion in requesting payment.

Can a physician renew a prescription over the phone?

In situations where the patient is known to the physician, where he/she has current knowledge of the patient's clinical status from previous encounters, or where he/she is able to accept an evaluation imparted by a colleague, a prescription may be renewed over the phone. However, the physician is not obligated to renew a prescription over the phone; the decision to do so is entirely at his or her own discretion.

Please note that many doctors have changed their procedures for medication renewals since COVID; ask your doctor for details.

Why does a physician provide a limited quantity of prescription medication when he/she knows the prescription will need to be refilled?

While it is very frustrating to only get a short-term prescription, there are a number of reasons why a physician may choose to limit a prescription, including the nature of the drug, side effects, toxic effects, the need for follow-up, etc. When a medication is prescribed, the physician has a responsibility to advise a patient about drug effects and interactions, side effects,

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contraindications, precautions, and any other information pertinent to the use of the medication. Before automatically renewing a prescription, a physician has an obligation to conduct a follow-up appointment, to assess the effectiveness of the medication, and determine whether a renewal is, in fact, necessary.

What are some of the issues specific to SCI and the doctor-patient relationship?

Some family physicians are more familiar with SCI than others. This means that patients need to be proactive in ensuring that their medical needs are met. Be familiar with the common issues experienced by people with SCI and be open with your physician about any changes you experience. Know when to request a referral and what tests you should be getting regularly. Connect with Peers and use credible online resources to gather medical information specific to SCI. Encourage your doctor to take the time to learn from you and your experiences with SCI. SCI BC has a list of SCI-related online medical information resources developed by expert physicians and researchers that can be shared with your medical team. See link at the bottom of this document.

Getting a second opinion is often recommended when talking about medical care and decision making. In practice, this is harder to do in our publicly-funded system and with doctor shortages. You can try asking your doctor “Is there someone else we should consult with?”, as it’s more collaborative and less confrontational than asking outright for a second opinion. Asking for this extra “consultation” may be especially useful when thinking about a referral to a physiatrist (a doctor who specializes in spinal cord injury). See the Advocacy section for a link to the GF Strong Outpatient Program.

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What information can I give to my doctor?

It's a good idea to start out your relationship with a physician (or even to update them) by giving them some reference information to keep in your file, including your Discharge Information form from GF Strong that lists your injury date, injury/lesion level, short summary of any major surgery you've had, medications and any complications you regularly experience. If you don't have copies of your records, you can request them from the hospital(s) that treated you and your previous doctors. There may be a charge in some cases to obtain your records.

It's also useful to have this information in your wallet or [Go Bag](#) to share with any clinicians or specialists you may be referred to. Surprisingly, most referrals from your doctor will only contain a brief letter, and possibly recent tests or scans you've had, and the office may rely on you to provide the rest of the details.

We have a guide to regular scans and checkups suggested for people with SCI to prevent complications and manage existing ones. Discuss [this guide](#) with your doctor to see what is most appropriate in your situation.

Advocacy

There is sometimes a fine line between respecting your doctor's knowledge and expertise and advocating for what you know you need. Here are some tips that may help:

- Write down your questions or concerns before your appointment. Consider writing down the doctor's answers and/or bringing a family member with you to help remember the answers.
- If you have several issues to deal with, let the booking assistant know to find you an appointment when there is time to address the issues you have, and consider breaking them up into one or two visits in order to allow enough time.
- Explain why/how SCI impacts your medical situation.

- If you do reference other medical sources you want your doctor to consider, be cautious how you present the information. Explain that it is from a reputable source and you are presenting it to help your doctor help you better (not to prove your doctor wrong).
- Suggest your doctor consult with the expert support services at [SCI Nav](#) or the Outpatient Nurse at GF Strong for SCI-specific information and/or request a referral to the [GF Strong Outpatient program](#).
- If you require pain management, keep a diary of what pain you feel and when, as that can help your doctor understand your experience. Practice explaining it and learn how to describe your pain using adjectives and scales of pain (explain your pain scale as it differs for each person). Explain how it impacts your life and what helps or doesn't help. Recognize that most people use multiple pain management techniques to successfully manage their pain and be open to suggestions from the doctor, but don't be afraid to insist on medical pain management options as part of the treatment plan.
- If you're dealing with pain, it's important to have a clear picture about what to do when you need medical care as a patient receiving pain management. This recent article in [The Spin](#) provides helpful information.
- Consider talking with your pain management doctor about how you should approach the topic with other physicians, for example if you have to go to the ER, or to a walk-in clinic.
- It helps to be willing to work with your doctor on a strategy that reflects both of your priorities. For example, if your doctor wants to eliminate other possible diagnoses even though you feel the urgency of moving right to tests or treatment for a different diagnosis, you

could use in “if/also” terms, instead of “either/or”. You can say, “if you need to rule other diagnoses out first, could we also get started with the referral to the X specialist, so we can rule out the other conditions while I’m waiting for that referral?”

Useful References:

College of Physicians and Surgeons of BC

<https://www.cpsbc.ca/>

Find information about medical practices in BC on a wide range of topics.

Doctors of BC

<https://www.doctorsofbc.ca/>

A variety of information for doctors and patients.

SCI Medical Information on the SCI BC Information Database

<https://sci-bc.ca/sci-info-database/>

Lots of SCI information from researchers and medical professionals. Contact us if you have questions about specific resources but here are some good places to start:

[SCIRE](#)

[Paralyzed Veterans of America](#)

[SCI BC Autonomic Dysreflexia Wallet Card](#)

[SCI BC Pressure Injury Wallet Card](#)

[SCI BC UTI Prevention and Detection Wallet Card](#)

Virtual Clinics

Check with your local health authority to see if they have a virtual clinic or use one of the following options:

TELUS Health My Care

<https://www.telus.com/en/health/my-care>

Virtual Clinic

<https://virtualclinics.ca/>

Virtual Physicians at HealthLink BC

<https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/find-care/healthlink-bc-8-1-1-services/physician-services-healthlink-bc>