

# THE PREPARED PATIENT

## Giving Your Doctor the Pink Slip

### Time to Look Elsewhere for Health Care?

When Lois Anderson, already a breast cancer survivor, told her regular doctor that she kept feeling like she had the flu, he suggested she see a specialist.

Afraid the cancer had returned, Anderson was looking for quick action and the best doctor possible. It turns out “the best” in her York, Pa., hometown was a chest surgeon who was known for his skills as a surgeon and for thinking a lot of himself.

She took some test results along when she went to consult with the surgeon. Her follow-up breast cancer care included regular blood tests to check if her cancer had returned.

Anderson’s most recent test for tumors showed she might have a problem, so she passed that information on to her new specialist.

But Anderson, who is a medical technologist, says she got the sense that the surgeon didn’t want to be bothered with medical evidence outside his expertise. “He said, ‘I’m the mechanic, I fix things,’” And, he didn’t seem to value her opinions, Anderson recalls.

She says he told her it was probably a chest cold and “we should wait three months and see.”

“My [blood test for tumors] kept rising; each one was more elevated than the next,” she says. “Finally, I said, ‘I want something done.’”

At that point, her specialist performed surgery to reach the area near the lungs. “He found a very thin layer of cancer on the pleural sac, where the lungs sit in. It hadn’t shown up on any CT scans,” Anderson says.

Anderson’s husband told her the surgeon came to talk to him when the operation was over: “He said to him, ‘Guess who was right?’ My husband said, ‘You were?’ He said, ‘No, she was.’”

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“My blood test for tumors kept rising. Finally, I said, ‘I want something done.’”

*--Lois Anderson, breast cancer survivor*

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### Top 10 Reasons to Fire Your Doctor

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| 1 Lack of confidence in doctor’s ability | 6 Excessively long wait to get an appointment |
| 2 Lack of continuity between visits      | 7 Doctor is always rushed                     |
| 3 Questions are not welcome              | 8 Inconvenient location                       |
| 4 Doctor is not forthcoming              | 9 Cost /coverage                              |
| 5 Doctor is cold and unsympathetic       | 10 Doctor is not respectful                   |

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That admission was little comfort for Anderson, who suspects that she lost valuable time waiting.

The new cancer was removed and Anderson received chemotherapy. As her care continues, Anderson wants doctors to listen to her and respect her own experiences and concerns. "Now, I would go to another surgeon, stand up to him, something, be more insistent," she says.

## The Experts' Viewpoint

Our experts — both physicians — talk frankly about rocky spots in doctor-patient relationships.

### *When you start seeing a specialist...*

Experts say that when patients go to specialty-care doctors, it can be even harder for patients to feel comfortable. Communication styles may not always mesh.

Dr. Thomas Weida: "With a specialist, patients can be more limited with their choices. I tell them, "Get the name of what he's calling it, write it down, come back to me and let's talk about it.'"

### *When your doctor doesn't seem to respect your opinions or welcome your questions ...*

The experts say you should speak up when you feel uncomfortable or it seems like your doctor is not listening to you.

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"How courageous or cowardly are you? Sometimes you have to face the music and see what happens."

--Dr. Barbara M. Korsch, expert on doctor-patient relations

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Dr. Barbara M. Korsch: "People think they'll get better treatment if [the doctor] likes you. The question is, how courageous or cowardly are you? Sometimes you have to face the music and see what happens. The result might be that you get what you want because he's so surprised that you said something."

### *When the doctor says No ...*

Try to learn the cause of the problem. Is it that you can't talk to your doctor or that you are having different ideas about what to do? Is your health insurance an issue?

Dr. Korsch: "What we can do is deal with how the visit actually goes. It's important to figure out if it is a system problem. In those cases the patients can't fix it, the doctor can't fix it."

Dr. Weida: "This can happen when I disagree with a patient about pain medication. Sometimes I've had to say: 'We have to agree to disagree on this.'"

Dr. Korsch: "Sometimes people have unrealistic expectations. They want you to put their child in the hospital for a cold."

### *When the medical staff is rude or it takes weeks to get an appointment...*

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"One of the reasons people leave a practice is the interaction with office staff."

--Dr. Thomas Weida, AAFP board member

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Dr. Weida: "I do prefer to know. Most of the time I'm in my little cubicle or in an exam room with a patient. If it's happened to one person, maybe it's happened to 20 or 30 people and I never heard about it. One of the reasons people leave a practice is the interaction with the office staff. That's something I can fix."

### *When it's clear you need to move on ...*

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There's no need for a dramatic breakup. Instead, send a letter asking for your medical records and express your

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concerns in a calm, businesslike way.

Dr. Korsch: "Move on if there is a breakdown in communication, but only if you've attempted to deal with it first. Remember, no personal attacks. The emphasis should be on 'We are having trouble.'"

Dr. Weida: "You might not click or connect; sometimes, it just doesn't work out. Then it's reasonable to look for another doctor. If you're not getting answers to your questions, if you don't know what's going on, then it's time to go."

## OUR EXPERTS

Barbara M. Korsch, M.D., is co-author of "The Intelligent Patient's Guide to the Doctor-Patient Relationship: Learning How to Talk So Your Doctor Will Listen."

Thomas Weida, M.D., is a physician in Hershey, Pa., and board member of the American Academy of Family Physicians.

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## Health Behavior News Service

Center for the Advancement of Health  
2000 Florida Avenue, N.W., Suite 210  
Washington, D.C. 20009

Published by the **HEALTH BEHAVIOR NEWS SERVICE**  
Lisa Esposito, Editor

**Written by** Taunya English, Associate Editor  
**Designed by** Brandon Moore, IT/Communications Manager

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