

Area Agency on Aging *Connections*

Doctor-patient rapport is important to good health

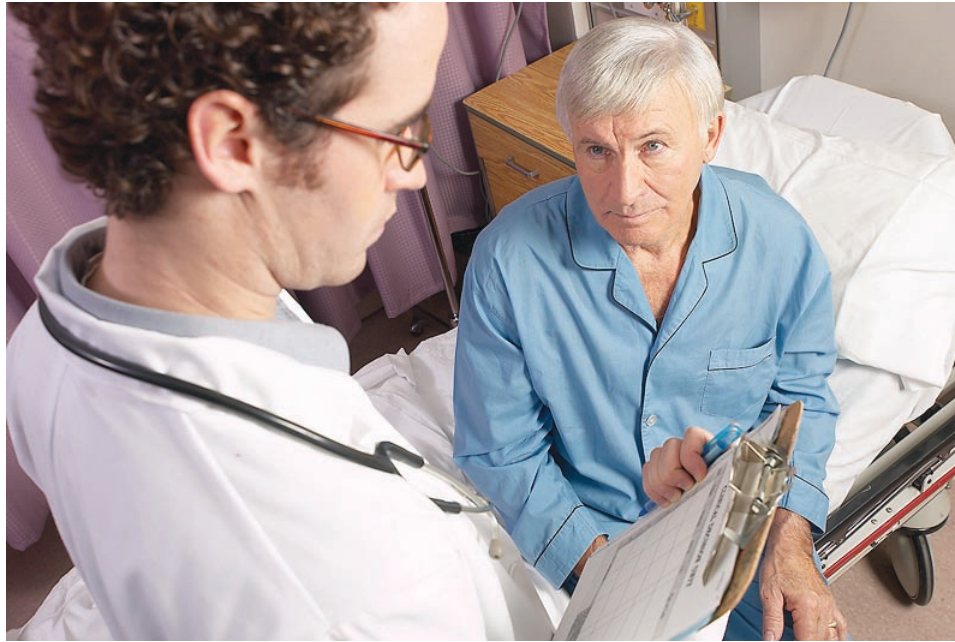
By Daniel Casciato
For Pittsburgh Senior News

The ability to communicate well with your physician is very important in obtaining good health care. Establishing and maintaining a good rapport takes time and effort on your part, as well as your doctor's. Ideally, you should be able to trust your physician with the most private situations or problems.

"Our health is an extraordinarily core part of our lives," says Dr. Terence W. Starz, chairman of the board for the Allegheny County Medical Society. "We need to feel comfortable about our health and our doctor and to make sure we take advantage of the medical visits that we have. In order for that to occur, you must participate actively and effectively."

Dr. Starz, a rheumatology specialist at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, says that seniors must remember that they are in charge of their health. "I remind my patients that they are the captain of the ship and we are the navigators. The significant other in their life is the first mate and together we manage their health care issues."

View your relationship with your doctor as a partnership with someone you can confide in. Together, you can work as a team along with nurses, physician assistants, pharmacists and other healthcare providers to solve your medical problems and keep you healthy. According to the National Institute on Aging (NIA), you should ask questions if the doctor's explanations or



instructions are unclear. Also, mention any problems you are experiencing even if the doctor doesn't ask, and let her know if you have concerns about a particular treatment or change in your daily life. Taking an active role in your healthcare puts the responsibility for good communication on both you and your physician.

The NIA publication "Talking With Your Doctor: A Guide for Older People" states that the first step in good communication is finding a primary care doctor who you feel comfortable talking to. This doctor gets to know you and what your health is normally like, and can help you make medical decisions that suit your values and daily habits.

"The doctor-patient relationship is essential, and patients must feel comfortable with their doctors," says Dr. Starz. "Your doctor has a responsibility to communicate effectively with you, to interact with you as an individual, and

to have you, as the patient, feel comfortable with your care. If you don't feel comfortable about the relationship, you should reexamine whether that's the person you want to have coordinating it."

A basic plan can help you make the most of your medical appointment whether you are starting with a new doctor or continuing with the doctor you've seen for years. If this is your first visit with a new doctor, Dr. Starz recommends that you bring your medical records or have them sent from your former doctor. "You should also come with a list of your medications and list of questions or issues you'd like to address," he says. "We want to hear what you have to say, and you should feel comfortable bringing up any issues that you may have. I love when patients come in with a list of questions or problems that they have. I think it's very important."

If you have more than a few items

to discuss, put them in order and ask about the most important ones first. Don't put off things that are really on your mind until the end of your appointment—bring them up immediately. Talking about your health means sharing information about how you feel physically, emotionally and mentally. Knowing how to describe your symptoms and bring up other concerns will help you become a partner in your healthcare.

Starz adds that you should have three goals in mind for any health visit: bring up any questions, establish the baseline of your health and look at preventive measures. "It's important to ask the doctor what's on your mind," he comments. "Nothing is too trivial. You need to ask your doctor questions about the conditions or symptoms that you have. Also, ask your doctor for an assessment of your health situation and what steps you can take to lead a healthier life."

One final thing that you should keep in mind is that your choice of healthcare providers is up to you. You make the final decision in deciding who will be taking care of you.

Good communication with your doctor is important in maintaining your health. You can get the most out of your visits by asking questions, providing necessary information and being educated about your own health. By doing so, you will make it much easier for your healthcare providers to give you the best possible care.

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