
HOW TO BE A GOOD MEDICAL CONSUMER

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***An International Foundation for Gender Education
Educational Resources Publication***

I.F.G.E.

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HOW TO FIND A PHYSICIAN

Getting Started.

Finding a physician would not appear to be difficult. After all, there are a great number of them listed in the Yellow Pages. However, finding one that's right for you is a difficult and very real problem.

To find a responsible, qualified, and interested doctor may sometimes be pure chance. Often we rely on the choice of a friend, or a relative whose only criteria is that the doctor he or she sees is likable, doesn't charge too much, or doesn't make a person wait too long in the waiting room. Sometimes the criteria extends to how well the person feels after the advice or therapy while giving the doctor full credit and not crediting the possible influence of time and Divine Providence. In short, what a physician's qualifications may be, his experience, and interest in keeping up with medical advances, are virtually unknown to you. Other than the fact that he is licensed or has on his wall his specialty Board certification, you haven't much to go on. Now add to that your special needs, and finding a physician becomes a very tall order indeed.

How do you find a physician? To begin with, don't allow what I have said thus far to discourage you or make you fearful, for while I have stated the problem, I hasten to tell you that it has a solution. Don't feel either that you should doubt or lessen the importance of a physician, for most are very responsible and anxious to be of help, and most are skilled and well-trained. Hence, I emphasize the fact that you do consult with a physician who will study you and your health profile for your overall health needs. You and he must be sure that you are in good health from every standpoint and that your good health will not be affected by the "meddlesome" plan you want to put into motion. Therefore, his knowledge and experience in general medicine and in general medical care are paramount. To that,

we want also to find that he has experience and information about transgender medicine. And there's the rub!

There are few physicians who have this special knowledge and experience. Even in those disciplines of medicine where a physician could successfully apply his art to hormonal or surgical management of the transgendered, his interest never takes him near that area of care. There are many endocrinologists who know nothing of hormonal techniques in a gender dysphoric individual and many psychiatrists who have never treated a transsexual for anything whatever. I caution you against selecting a physician with no experience who may be empathetic and interested, but is without proper background. To be sure, I don't favor "you teaching him" about you in this instance. It may be, of course, that's all there is, and you must rely on that physician's genuine desire to help. Therefore, he will go to the medical literature and read, and that literature is available to him. He can become informed and he can find other physicians for his guidance who are experienced in transgender care. In smaller communities, that may be all that is possible, but it's not the ideal.

So, where do we find that physician who is capable in caring for your general medical health and your special needs together?

Your family physician!

To start with, if you have a good relationship with your family physician, if you've known him for years, believe me, this is a good place to begin. He is a good place to start because (a) he has known you and your medical status for some time, and (b) because your secret, if it be a secret, is safe with him. He will keep it so. You have shared with him a confidence that he will not reveal. The probability of him knowing how to treat you and direct you is not great, but once again he will go to the literature to research you and your special needs. He will also have access to medical personnel who can give proper information and direction for you and tell you who they are. He can refer you to the right physician. There is no chance involved, no guesswork, no difficult search on his part or yours. He will make a sound decision and a sound referral for you.

A mental health professional.

If that is not an acceptable approach for you, then your next option is to make an appointment with a psychiatrist or a psychologist. You should inquire of his receptionist, asking if he manages patients with gender dysphoric needs. The chances are high that she will not know what you are talking about, but she will ask the doctor, and if he does have experience, you will be scheduled. If he doesn't, ask for his referral to a psychiatrist or psychologist who does. I am quite certain you will get a referral on that basis. If for some reason, however, he does not make a proper referral, call another office and use the same approach. Once again, you are on the right pathway. A psychiatrist or a psychologist who cares for the transgendered will know who, in your community or near to it, cares for the transgendered and their medical and surgical needs. You may choose to continue psychological therapy and evaluation while you move on to the medical referral given to you.

Gender clinic.

There's another option. If there is a gender identity clinic near to you, associated with that clinic is a team consisting of internists, endocrinologists and surgeons. In addition, there will be psychiatrists, psychologists and sociologists associated with that team. This is an ideal situation, for here most of the needs of the individual are met in one place. Enrollment in such a clinic has both positives and negatives. Discussion of this, however, is not necessary at this time, but I believe that the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages.

Your county medical society.

A call placed to the county medical society can help you locate a doctor who has an interest in gender dysphoria. Once again, that physician will know how to evaluate and treat, and will know who in the community or in a nearby city may also be oriented to this area of medicine.

Gender community referrals.

One more thought comes to mind. IFGE, in cooperation with local support organizations, is compiling a referral list of physi-

cians and therapists in locations over the country. The listing is not complete, and it needs constant attention and revision, but there is information available. Hopefully, in time, the liaison between the professionals and IFGE will expand such that it will be possible to refer an individual anywhere in the country to a doctor quite near them, and to one who is capable as well.

It does not have to be a matter of chance. It is possible to find a doctor who can be entrusted with your ordinary and extraordinary medical needs. You shouldn't hesitate to search, nor should you abandon the effort after one or two attempts. Doctors are becoming more knowledgeable and more interested. They are also more aware of where accurate medical information is to be found. There is a physician for you out there.

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GUIDELINES

What guidelines?

As I mentioned, for members of the transgender community, securing a physician who is knowledgeable, empathetic, responsive and interested, is at times very difficult. If they are male-to-female individuals, they may be even more hesitant because of the lack of body hair and other feminine attributes. If they are female-to-male individuals, while they have a good deal less to be concerned about from their physical appearance, they may also still be reluctant and embarrassed to have a physical examination. If they are taking hormones and have some of the attributes of either feminine or masculine development, they are, most of the time, very thoughtful and hesitant to go to any doctor for whatever the reason. It is a problem, but it is a solvable problem without doubt.

Once, however, you find the physician who is right for you, not only for your general medical needs, but also for your care in your transgender health, what guidelines do you have? What

guidelines do you have so as to be knowledgeable about your health and so that your confidence in your physician remains high?

Truthfully, your information will always be limited, for you need medical training to know fully what is being evaluated, and to what extent, but there are areas in which you can have meaningful information and understanding. If you have good rapport with your physician, and that is essential, and if he demonstrates willingness to instruct you as he treats you, then your questions will be welcome and his answers forthcoming and informative. That idea should be emphasized even more. If your doctor, even though busy, is willing to take time to give you information and reasons why he pursues certain studies or pathways in your health maintenance, then you can be assured that he is empathetic and caring.

Now what do you have to rely upon to judge his knowledge, insight, and competence? What criteria will guide you as you continue in the care of your selected physician?

The History and Physical Examination:

What he wants to know of your past medical health and how thoroughly he conducts your physical examination can yield clues to his skill and competence. Does he really seek to learn details? Does he really give you a very careful physical examination? - your eyes, your ears, your chest and genitalia, a rectal examination, a neurologic evaluation? This is important, not only as a start to your continued relationship, but certainly this complete evaluation is needed on a periodic basis as routine, perhaps once a year.

Laboratory Testing:

General studies should include a complete blood survey. Testing to be sure that you are not anemic, that kidney function and liver and adrenal function are in order. Studies to evaluate thyroid activity, calcium and phosphorus metabolism are very important. A complete urinalysis is needed and routine chest films and EKG are necessary. A lipid profile for both M-to-F as well as F-to-M individuals is a must.

Special testing should also be done when indicated. Scans with isotopes or ultrasound may be required, and if you are on a M-to-F hormonal regimen, serum testosterone and serum prolactin levels in the blood are very important. Perhaps even mammography is a part of this special evaluation. If you are a F-to-M individual, all of this is needed with exception to the aforementioned hormone levels in your blood.

If you have specific complaints referable to certain organ system dysfunction, then other testing should be considered, for instance, stool evaluations, GI X-rays, vein competency testing or studies designed to evaluate cardiac health, for instance, vector-electrocardiography, or treadmill studies. In short, your overall health and your transgender health should be carefully, thoughtfully evaluated and then discussed.

Periodic follow-up evaluations are scheduled as indicated by your health status and the medications you use. His attention to this gives you continual reassurance of his skill and interest.

The time spent in explaining and instructing:

Nothing, I believe, gives you more insight into what a doctor knows in general about medicine, and about you in specific, as does discussion. His willingness to share his information, his planning, his concern, and his comfort with your health is a direct view into his empathy and responsibility to you. His reassurance and his need to direct you tactfully to a particular pathway is all essential.

Is there a need for consultation?

Your doctor doesn't know everything, nor has he experience with every problem and disorder. He knows the physicians in his region who are more experienced and expert in different specialties and in different diseases. He should not hesitate to put you and your difficulty into their experience. He should acquaint them with the person you are. He should continue your care along with those others for, in fact, he is generally asking for advice, not transferring you out of his care. Their information and advice should make your care with the original doctor smoother. Consultation is an all-important feature of medical practice.

The Hormone Question:

You may never intend to take hormones. In time, however, some individuals are drawn to it, and it may be that your physician knows little-to-nothing about this area of care. Therefore, is he willing to read to instruct himself? In addition, will he look to other health professionals in the community who have experience in transgender medicine? If he is open and empathetic as we believe him to be, he will have a team of consultants as may be necessary to determine the proper steps. Your personal physician will go to the medical literature and learn what should be known, then with his own information and that of others, his plan of care, shared with you, can be placed in the optimal light. You may prove to be a proper candidate for such therapy, or there may be a few hindrances to be swept away. It may be also that you could be at risk for the therapy that you desire. All of this must be discussed, evaluated, and honestly worked through. That medical physician you have selected, can and should work it out fully with you.

Will a medical health consultant be needed?

We all have times in our lives when depression creeps over us. Very stressful problems arise with dissolving marriages and relationships. Job loss, or loss of a loved one can be fracturing and crushing. For some there is more. There are difficult choices. For example, which community does one belong to, or which should one live in? The impact of our choices for ourselves may be overwhelming to other important people in our lives. How do we deal with these things? Your medical physician can help, but lack of expertise and time may not permit giving what you need. Yet, he can be the one to put you into the correct person's hands. His referral to a mental health professional who has experience in transgender problems of this kind, is essential and he should be alert to it and should know who this person is.

Are you planning surgery?

I look at surgery with two considerations in mind. Is it to be of a cosmetic nature, or is it for sexual reassignment? Cosmetic procedures, such as facial alteration, or breast augmentation should be done by skillful plastic surgeons known to the general

medical physician. Board certified plastic surgeons are very capable people and very available in the medical community. Generally finding a very capable and ingenious one will be of little problem. A surgeon to do the very complex and complicated surgical procedures required for sexual reassignment is not so easily obtained. There are some very talented people in this country and in Europe. Your physician may not know of them and his abilities to relate to what they do and what they may ask of him in the immediate and later post-operative period may be a problem for him. He should be very willing to educate himself, to read and to learn what will be necessary to manage you when you return to him after surgery, whether that be cosmetic or SRS.

Let me also mention that there should be communication between your private physician and all surgeons before and after surgery of any kind.

Conclusion - a plea for the doctor:

To conclude, I would like to make a small plea for the physician you may select. If he is capable without doubt, he will then be very busy. He will extend that kind of consideration and care to everyone in his practice. He often may be very fatigued and distracted. You may at times have to make allowance for that. If those times are too often and begin to affect your medical care and your rapport, you may have to consider change, but keep in mind, and you should always remember that he has important needs, and your judgement should be tempered with understanding. It truly is a two-way relationship.

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