



The modern patient



If we get sick, we expect doctors and everyone else involved in our care to do all they can to make us better. If we are born with a health problem or develop a chronic condition such as diabetes, we expect the same people to do everything in their power to keep us as healthy as possible.

As Canadians, we feel entitled to receive the best possible medical care in a timely fashion. Case closed. Of course, it isn't as simple as that. Economics and other realities of living in Canada in the 21st century can get in the way. Frankly, Canada can't afford to do everything needed to provide everybody with the optimum amount of medical care that they need now or in the future.

How we solve that particular problem is one in which we all have stake — whether you believe in totally publicly funded medicare or some other funding system.

Beyond the economics are bigger issues of rights and responsibilities. While many believe that being Canadians gives us the right to medical care, few give any thought to the responsibilities that come with it. Yet we now have enough information about the human body and how it works to know that you can stay healthier and avoid sickness if you look after yourself. As a result, most of us can and should make a significant contribution to our own health.

And when it comes to visiting the doctor about a medical problem, there are steps you should take to help yourself, your doctor and the system as a whole. Here are a few.

- Give your doctor accurate information. It's difficult for a physician to diagnose a problem and prescribe the proper treatment without have all the relevant

information from the patient. For the patient, that means not hiding symptoms or possible causes of ill health, even ones you may find embarrassing.

- Follow your doctor's instructions. Yes, you should definitely question your doctor if something is unclear or if you disagree with his or her interpretation. You can even seek a second opinion if you feel your doctor is wrong. But if that is not the case, take medication as prescribed and follow other instructions given to treat an illness or condition. Not doing so will jeopardize your ability to benefit from the care you are given.
- Be respectful of those providing your care. Being sick is no fun and can make you tired, grouchy or upset. But remember that your doctor and others are there to help you get better. It will not help anyone to take out your anger or frustration on them, especially when they are coping with an overburdened system.
- Be a partner in your own health. Long gone are the days when people unquestioningly followed their doctors' orders. Doctors want to work with patients in a partnership to maximize health. That means that you should take an interest in your well-being and how to maintain it as well as in any illness and how to cure or minimize it.

Health rights and health responsibilities: two sides of the same coin.

Pat Rich
Editor-in-chief
pat.rich@cma.ca