

How to find a doctor: 9 qualities doctors look for in their own physician

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As Delaware, like the rest of the nation, country, struggles with a shortage of doctors in a handful of specialties, finding the right specialist doctor for you can be difficult — and tiring. Meredith Newman, News Journal



(Photo: Stock)

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Kim Kuhl has been on the hunt for three weeks.

The North Wilmington mom is looking for a behavioral therapist for her 11-year-old son, and it hasn't been easy. She wants someone with a good reputation, who has experience working with children with learning disabilities and has openings for appointments after 4 p.m.

But at the end of the day, when it comes to choosing a doctor, Kuhl goes with her gut.

"It's about personal feelings with a good match," she said. "Am I comfortable? Is my son walking around the room? Or is he withdrawn?"

As Delaware, like the rest of the nation, struggles with a shortage of doctors in a handful of specialties, finding the right specialist can be difficult — and tiring.

The News Journal spoke with a family medicine doctor, an OB-GYN and a psychiatrist about what they look for in doctors and signs of how to know when you've found the right — or wrong — one.

"You've got to be patient," said Dr. Neil Kaye, a psychiatrist in Hockessin. "It's hard even for those of us in the profession. None of us can be fly on the wall."

They are liked

All three doctors agreed: Before you look on the internet for nearby doctors, talk to your family and friends, sort of a flesh and blood "rate your doctors" app.

Kaye views "word of mouth" to be a very important step in finding a great doctor, especially with mental health. You're likely to get an more reliable opinion about the doctor and his or her office than a rating website would give.

He also recommended relying on your primary care doctor for help. Doctors typically have a network of physicians in different specialties that they know on a personal and professional level.

And feel free to ask how they know them, whether it's personally or simply in a network they are also in. If they know them personally, you can ask more questions.

They are OK with a 'test drive'

Kaye is a firm believer in "test driving" when looking for a new doctor.

People shouldn't be afraid of bringing in a laundry list of questions and knowing what they're looking for, he said. Kaye finds that some people forget that when they are looking for a new doctor, they are also looking for a service to buy.

And if you don't like a doctor, it's OK if you don't go back.



Dr. Richard Henderson is the president of the Medical Society of Delaware. (Photo: Courtesy of Mary Fenimore)

Dr. Richard Henderson, the president of the Medical Society of Delaware, believes the first impression of a doctor "usually does the trick" in terms of knowing if the physician is right for a patient.

But for those who don't know if they like a doctor after a first meeting or talking on the phone, the Wilmington OB-GYN recommends setting up an appointment that serves as a "meet and greet."

"If they don't offer that, that might be an indicator," he said. "One of the worst feelings in the world is that it's being done to you instead of for you. Don't hesitate to be as educated as possible.

"Most physicians enjoy having that conversation."

Their schedule syncs with yours

Dr. James Gill, a Wilmington family medicine physician, recommends people factor in doctors' schedules during their search.

If a doctor doesn't have flexible hours or works part-time, this could become an issue if you face a serious medical issue, Gill said. Patients should also look for practices where there are other physicians on staff. In case of an emergency, these doctors can see you and access your medical information.

"You really want someone who is more likely to be available so you don't have to go to an urgent care," he said.

They are open to telemedicine

Another consideration to keep in mind is if the doctor communicates electronically, Kaye said. If they do, they might be easier to get in touch with.

In the past year, the Delaware medical community has become more invested in telehealth. It's become an increasingly popular option for doctors and patients, especially for those who live in southern Delaware or don't have the means to regular travel to the hospital.



Abigail Bucklin, of Rehoboth, talks to her doctor about her recovery through CareConnect, a telehealth program that Nemours doctors have been using. (Photo: Jennifer Corbett, The News Journ)

They have a good reputation

When looking for a new physician, it's not always important patients get along perfectly with their doctor, Kaye said.

For some situations, particularly for surgeries, Kaye recommends setting personality aside and focusing more on technique.

"I don't care if the doctor is my friend," he said. "I want them to do the job right."

But for specialties that provide long-term care, particularly in mental health, a close relationship can be important since you'll be dealing with this doctor frequently, Kaye said.

Their staff is dependable, helpful

The psychiatrist recommended Delawareans also take a close look at the staff in a doctor's office, since a patient might interact with them far more than their doctor.

"If you like the doctor, but the office manager is a nasty person and doesn't return calls or messages are handled poorly, that's a big deal," he said.

Dr. Neil Kaye is a psychiatrist who practices in Hockessin. (Photo: SUCHAT PEDERSON, SUCHAT PEDERSON, SUCHAT PEDERSON)

They are open about smaller details

When talking to a doctor during the first appointment, patients should ask how quickly they should expect to hear back from a doctor's office on both urgent matters such as feeling sick and routine matters such as needing a prescription refill, and also ask who handles those calls.

People should also ask if a doctor charges for phone calls or charges for prescription refills if they aren't handled at the appointment, he said.

At Kaye's practice, his patients call a number that either goes directly to him or his voicemail. He then handles all of the calls so his patients don't have to deal with a middleman.

"Patients want a lot of face time," he said. "I understand that and I think they deserve that."

They will suit your future situation

Gill, president of Family Medicine at Greenhill, recommends families, especially young couples, find a primary care physician who can care both for children and adults — sooner rather than later.

Since there's a dire shortage of primary care physicians in Delaware, it can take some people months to get an appointment with a physician, he said. And if a couple does decide to have a child, their family physician could also become their child's doctor.



Dr. Magdy Attia, division chief of urgent care and associate director of emergency department at Nemours Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children, consults with a patient. (Photo: Nemours)

“It’s much better care medically,” Gill said. “You know what’s going on with the whole family. And it’s more convenient.”

It also avoids young people having to make the transition from pediatrician to primary care doctor, he said.

Gill also recommends that patients not wait for an emergency to find a primary care physician and not depend too heavily on urgent care.

“I think urgent cares are nice to have but they’re poor substitute for primary care,” Gill said.

Their age works with your situation

Patients should also think about the age of a prospective doctor, Gill notes. While that shouldn’t be the only factor involved in choosing a physician, it is important to think about what happens if a doctor plans to retire in the coming years, he said.

A doctor's age isn't always indicative of their skill level, Kaye pointed out.

"Do you want to be starting with a doctor who is 68 and retiring in a couple years?" he said. "It's a fair question."

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