

## Be your own best healthcare advocate

By Suze Hargraves

You take your car to the mechanic. You tell the service manager you hear a “clunk”. If you were to turn around and leave at that point you would force your mechanic to drive the car around and conduct expensive diagnostics to find out the source of the clunk. Most people would not do this. They would note when the clunk was first heard, when it occurs and what changes, if any there have been in the performance of the vehicle. This information gives your mechanic a place to start. If we can do this so readily at an auto repair shop why on earth can't we seem to do it in a healthcare facility?

Unfortunately for a majority of us, there is something about a medical facility of any type that seems to intimidate us into silence. Our voices are key to increasing the quality of our healthcare and reducing its cost. When we are vocal about our history, answer questions honestly and clearly state what hurts, when, where and why we are providing valuable diagnostic information, not complaining. If you don't speak up, you will end up paying for tests and referrals that could have been avoided. Worse you could end up with an incorrect diagnosis that could cost you far more than the contents of your wallet. You need to be your own advocate. All of these self-advocacy tips apply to both physical and mental healthcare. Here's how to start:

1. Talk to your blood-related family members about their health. Are there any conditions they have? What family medical history do they recall? No single person is going to remember everything so ask multiple family members for input. Write it all down and make copies of this information available to your family and medical providers. In times of crisis, it becomes difficult to remember the details of family medical history, but having this information can be life-saving.
2. When you are having a health problem you need to take notes. Answer the questions what, where and when from every angle possible. All of this will become a key part of your diagnostic process. During a medical appointment nerves can make it difficult for us to recall details. Don't depend on your memory. Write things down.
3. Be honest when answering questions asked by your healthcare provider. Lying could cost you your life. If you use recreational drugs like cocaine but are seeing a doctor for high blood pressure you're a statistic looking for a very final list to land on. If you drink five drinks a day but say you only drink one, you could fall victim to any number of serious complications from prescription medications. If you're not comfortable discussing your lifestyle or choices with your healthcare provider you need to find another provider. Holding back information is dangerous to you and forces your provider to make decisions and diagnosis's based on false criteria.
4. If your healthcare team is speaking in terms you don't understand ask them to stop. Medical professionals will often talk in medical terms because that is the terminology that is familiar to them. When you request that they speak in terms you can understand most will be more than happy to so. With clear lines of communication you can ask questions and expect clear answers. Remember that your provider wants you to be healthy and you have a right to understand what is going on and why. It's teamwork.

This is a great website to help you think about how to be your own best advocate before you visit a healthcare provider: <http://www.ahrq.gov/questionsaretheanswer/index.html>.

You need to be both proactive and vocal in your healthcare process. Feeling good is as much, if not more, of the patient's responsibility as it is the providers. Be your own and advocate-speak up.