

The Impact of Doctor Loss

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It didn't occur to me to worry when Dr. Blumberg's* first letter arrived on a Saturday in October. I opened the envelope and was surprised to learn that Dr. Blumberg was doubling her concierge fees and cutting down on the number of patients in her practice. She said to let her know if we wanted to continue with her by November 15th, still a month away. "Well, that gives us plenty of time to consider what to do," I thought, fending off the vague anxiety generated by the phrases "increase in fee" and "reduced number of patients."

Since my husband and I were both patients of Dr. Blumberg (myself for over twenty years, my husband for ten), that meant two doubled fees. It was hard to imagine medical care without her, but we decided we should do our "due diligence" by speaking to another doctor or two to find out about their practices and fee structures.

We decided to consult Dr. Reese, a younger doctor with a simpler office located nearer our home. We had a good meeting with Dr. Reese but concluded that our long history with Dr. Blumberg was worth the increased fee. We sent her our sign-up materials shortly after November 1st.

Within a few days, the second letter came from Dr. Blumberg, this time by registered mail, saying that by the time she received our sign-up materials, enough people had responded to allow her to have the size practice she wanted. She stated in blunt language that as of January 1st, she would no longer be our doctor. There was not a word of compassion for us.

I was in a state of shock. We had done what Dr. Blumberg asked and now she was rejecting us. I had known her longer than my best friend! What had I done to deserve this? I quickly re-contacted Dr. Reese's office to sign on with him, hoping he still had room in his practice for us. Fortunately, he did.

* all names have been changed

Thus began the painful journey of doctor loss, which included nightmares and severe anxiety during the day. A benefit of my symptoms was an increased empathy for my own anxious, insomniac patients.

I wondered if I would survive the year without Dr. Blumberg. Would Dr. Reese order the necessary tests to make sure my medications weren't harming me? Would he check my cholesterol frequently enough? my blood pressure? my blood sugar? Would he know what to do if I developed something serious, even life threatening?

I have had a life-long allergy to tree nuts and one evening in mid-December, I inadvertently ate candy that contained ground almonds. My eyes swelled up, my mouth itched, and I feared going into shock. I took some Benadryl, which fortunately calmed my reaction, and was able to go to sleep. In the morning, I had to decide who to call: Dr. Blumberg or Dr. Reese? It was clearly time to take the plunge. I called Dr. Reese. His assistant said to come right in and I was at his office in ten minutes. He prescribed a heavy dose of Prednisone for the next week. I was relieved. His attention had been prompt and caring. Gradually the nightmares subsided, my sleep improved, and I realized I would survive this loss.

Medical attention is psychologically related to maternal concern. Both involve intimate care of the body and are based on the deepest, most trusting level of human attachment. For this reason, doctor loss, with its echoes of maternal loss, packs a special punch.

Given the importance of the doctor-patient relationship, what can a physician do if his/her practice becomes too large and burdensome or if there is a need to move to a new location? This difficult situation can be made less painful in a few ways: one is bringing in a new doctor to join the practice. The new doctor could ease the burden on the older doctor and benefit from his/her knowledge and experience, even if only during a transition phase.

Another way to ease the blow would be honest, compassionate communication to patients about changes in the doctor's practice. If Dr. Blumberg had been open about choosing people on a first-come first-serve basis, we would have made our decision sooner. Had she expressed the slightest bit of compassion for the profound loss she was imposing on us, I would not have ended up feeling abandoned and angry.

In this time of managed care, it is critical that doctors recognize their importance to their patients and understand that decisions about their practices can have serious consequences for patients. This fall, I discovered that doctor loss could affect my health at least as much as a physical disease.

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