

## Talk to Me, Doctor!

*Information from June Isaacson Kailes' book Be a Savvy Health Care Consumer, Your Life May Depend on It!*

Finding your way safely through the increasingly complex health care jungle is never easy, especially if you are sick. It can be a tricky and pressure-filled business, but there are ways to protect yourself. The most important thing to be recognized is that ultimately you alone are responsible for managing your own health. June Kailes, a Disability Policy Consultant, points out that consumers, especially disabled consumers, have to stand up for themselves, treating health professionals as consultants rather than as gods.

Passive consumers want providers to take charge of their health, rely totally on providers' advice, do not ask questions, offer information only when asked, are complacent and have a fatalistic "what will be, will be" attitude, are not interested in thinking about options, are hesitant to disagree with or confront their providers, often feel helpless and lost in the health care system, and worry that their health care will be compromised if they ask questions or disagree. In fact, research confirms that people who are more active in their relationships with their physicians have more positive results. As providers get to know you, they're able to see you as an individual rather than a textbook or theoretical case. Visiting a provider can be highly stressful. Being partially or completely undressed and addressing the doctor in a white coat can be intimidating. Some advice for getting over the "white coat" syndrome:

1. Consider bringing an advocate/friend who can listen, take notes, and help ask questions. Choose a support person who has the skill to think objectively and is able to listen and remember accurately. Ask them to assist but not take over.
2. Take notes. "The faintest ink is more accurate than the strongest memory."
3. Ask open-ended questions. Avoid leading questions. Leading questions can force providers to give the answer you want even if it's not true. Wrong or leading question: "I'm going to be okay, aren't I?" (This implies you may not want to know any bad news.) Right or open-ended questions: What are the chances of my recovery? What's the outlook? My prognosis? What are the implications of the treatment?
4. Never be afraid to say, "I'm having trouble understanding. Could you describe the problem in plain terms?"
5. Sometimes what you hear may surprise, shock or upset you. Ask how much time you can take for making a decision without endangering effective treatment.
6. Always consider getting a second opinion. When the second opinion differs from the first, you may feel justifiably confused and decide you want a third opinion. Get one or use a trusted provider to review the differing recommendations.
7. If you have a disability, be sure to find doctors who are "disability-aware." Being a savvy health care consumer does take time and planning. If you do not follow any of these visit strategies, at least remember this: you have the right and responsibility to ask: Why? Why not? What? How? When?