



## Who you going to call – Choosing a health care professional

Who are you going to call when you have an orthopedic injury or problem?

Specialization describes the way of health care and medicine as it is practiced today. It is rare that a healthcare professional describes himself as a generalist. Even family practice physicians often specialize in sports medicine, woman's issues, or some other specific area. Ancillary medical fields such as Physical Therapy have Specialty Board certification processes in place for 7 specialty areas, such as, Orthopedics, Sports medicine, or Pediatrics. Orthopedic surgeons often have sub specialties according to regions of the body, spinal surgeons, knee and hip surgeons, one orthopedic surgeon who is a friend claims to be a small parts surgeon (hands and feet).

Some health insurance plans control "who you are going to call", and force you to call your primary care physician first. A study by DB Forrest ((2002) found family physicians referred only 5% of the office visits to a specialist. A study by G Albertson (2000) found primary care physicians failed to explicitly recognize patients' desire to be referred to a specialist a majority of the time. Patients were more likely to initiate the discussions of there desire to be referred to a specialist when they saw their usual primary care physician.

Of course many health insurance plans allow the individual to choose to see a specialist without having to go through a gate keeper. In this situation the individual needs to answer many question, including is my problem an orthopedic problem, will it require surgery, if it does not require surgery which type of health care professional should I see, which specific specialist should I see? Whether the primary care physician is making the decision or the individual the two major questions, that need to be addressed is to choose from different types of specialties, and than select a specific practitioner.

Buy definition orthopedic surgeons are experts at providing surgery, yet many orthopedic problems do not require surgery. An orthopedic surgeon friend of mine says "going to an orthopedic surgeon is like a chicken going to Colonel Sanders. Noted physician James Cyrix

professed there should be a distinction between Orthopedic Surgery and Orthopedic Medicine physician. His analogy was cardiac surgeons do not practice cardiology, but orthopedic surgeons are expected to provide non surgical orthopedic care – orthopedic medicine. Most orthopedic surgeons would prefer to spend their time doing surgery, rather than dealing with non surgical orthopedic problems. The evidence for this is many orthopedic surgeons will turn their patients over to Physicians Assistants, Nurse Practitioners, or Physical Therapists to provide the non surgical care of orthopedic problems.

Abraham Maslow a noted psychologist said “if the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail”. If you go to a surgeon he will offer you surgery, if you go to an internist he will offer you medicine, if you go to a chiropractor he will offer you manipulation, if you go to a physical therapist he will offer you exercise and movement therapy. Our view of the world has certain biases.

Recently a patient with an over use injury called asking for an exercise program to solve her back pain. She explained that she was tired from working two jobs, and was finding it difficult to continue her cardio exercise program. I pointed out to her that perhaps the best treatment was to rest. She had difficulty accepting this advice, as her view of the world was that exercise made her feel better, so if she should be able to find an exercise to make her back feel better.

Whatever the situation it is important to keep an open mind with regard to underlying mechanism of a specific intervention as well as possible alternative hypothesis or mechanisms. Recognize some individual health care professionals are more open than others to view the world differently, than their particular biases.

I learned many things from my sister as she was dying from cancer. For 5 years her major roll in life was being a cancer patient. During this process she learned as a patient she could hire and fire her health care professional despite the fact that her health insurance plan was a HMO which restricted her choices. During the process she fired several doctors. She considered many factors when deciding, one factor was whether the physician was willing to recognize that some problems require a hammer, some problems require duct tape, and some problems may need the weird tools of the Ghost Busters.

If you have an injury which occurred because of over use, selecting an orthopedic surgeon to help is questionable. By definition the cause of an over use injury is use. Intervention needs to decrease the usage, or

change the manner of use. If the over use injury is caused because the musculoskeletal structure being used is faulty than perhaps orthopedic surgery can change the structure being used.

I have had patients with an over use injury call me to say they were going to see an Orthopedic surgeon for help with their over use injury. I have an ego, and this use to upset me, but now I am upset at my self, because I failed to recognize that the patient was not getting from me the information they wanted, correct diagnosis, correct treatment, or appropriate reassurance. I should have recognized earlier that my perception of the patient's problem was I was dealing with nails, but maybe there were a few screws and nuts in the mix. I should have referred the patient to another physical therapist, or specialist in over use injuries.

Who you going to call when you have an orthopedic problem? Call someone who can diagnosis the problem. Call someone who can alleviate the problem? Call someone who can use a hammer, and recognize sometimes a hammer doesn't work and it is Okay to call a Ghost Buster