

Doctors' Interpersonal Skills
 Are Valued More Than Training
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People place more importance on doctors' interpersonal skills than their medical judgment or experience, according to the latest Wall Street Journal Online/Harris Interactive health-care poll, and doctors' failings in these areas are the overwhelming factor that drives patients to switch doctors.

Eighty-five percent of those polled said treating a patient with dignity and respect is an extremely important quality in a doctor, and 84% cited listening carefully and being easy to talk to as important qualities, according to the poll. Only 58% said having "a lot of experience treating patients with your medical condition" was extremely important, the poll found.

"These startling numbers show that doctors' training and knowledge of new medical treatments are less important to many patients than their interpersonal skills -- treating patients with respect, listening carefully... and really caring," says Humphrey Taylor, chairman of the Harris Poll at Harris Interactive.

While 78% of those polled cited "being up-to-date with the latest medical research and treatment" as extremely important, only 54% said that describes their doctor well.

"This large gap indicates that as the level of information available to consumers increases and patients become more proactive, there is an increased likelihood they will ask doctors' about treatment alternatives their doctors are not aware of," says Katherine Binns, senior vice president at Harris Interactive. "So as consumers become more proactive they also become more aware of just how challenging it is for physicians to stay abreast with the many advances taking place in health care."

While 72% of poll respondents said they hadn't changed doctors for any of the reasons listed, 14% of those who did change a doctor in the past five years said it was because the doctor "didn't listen carefully," and 13% said they switched doctors because of being kept waiting too long.

When it comes to contacting a doctor on non-urgent questions, 71% said they prefer to communicate over the telephone, and only 8% preferred e-mail.

--Beckey Bright

Here are the results of the latest poll:

A. "Which of the following qualities are extremely important to you in the doctor or doctors who treat you?"

B. Which of the following phrases, if any, do you think describe your current doctor well?*

Base: All Adults

	EXTREMELY IMPORTANT	DESCRIBES YOUR DOCTOR WELL	GAP**
Treats you with dignity and respect	85%	73%	-12%
Listens carefully to your health care concerns and questions	84	68	-16
Is easy to talk to	84	69	-15
Takes your concerns seriously	83	69	-14
Is willing to spend enough time with you	81	62	-19
Truly cares about you and your health	81	63	-18
Has good medical judgment	80	65	-15
Asks you good questions to really understand your medical conditions and your needs	79	61	-18
Is up-to-date with the latest medical research and medical treatment	78	54	-24
Can see you at short notice, if necessary	71	53	-18
Responds promptly when you call or email with questions or concerns	60	38	-22

Has a lot of experience treating patients with your medical condition(s)	58	45	-13
Could get you admitted to a leading hospital when you need it	55	46	-9
Has been trained in one of the best medical schools	27	25	-2
Is of your own sex or gender	15	36	+21
Is of your own race or ethnic background	10	30	+20

*Respondents were advised: "If you have more than one doctor, please answer based on the doctor you visit most frequently."

**The difference between the first two columns.

"In the past five years, have you ever changed your doctor (or doctors) for any of the following reasons?"

Base: All Adults

	TOTAL	SEX	
		Male	Female
Didn't listen carefully to you	14%	10%	17%
Kept you waiting too long	13	11	15
Didn't spend enough time with you	12	11	13
Didn't treat you with respect	11	8	14
Wasn't available when you needed him or her	11	9	12
Had nurses or office staff you didn't like	9	4	13
Did not prescribe appropriate treatment	8	6	11
Didn't explain your medical problems so you could understand them	8	6	10
Didn't answer your questions honestly and completely	7	5	8
Wasn't knowledgeable and competent	6	5	7
Charged fees which were unreasonable	6	5	7
Didn't seem up-to-date with new medical advances	5	4	6
Didn't order the appropriate test	5	3	6
Refused to accept a second opinion from another doctor	3	2	3
None of these/Did not change doctors	72	77	67

"Patients and physicians can communicate in different ways. When you have a non-urgent question for your doctor, how do you prefer to communicate with him or her?"

Base: All Adults

	TOTAL	SEX	
		Male	Female
By telephone	71%	68%	74%
In person	21	22	20
Via e-mail	8	10	6

Note: These data have been adjusted for the fact that only 70% of adults are online.