

Last October, POZ Magazine published an article entitled "Love Your Doc? POZ Readers Tell Why." The piece summarized the results of a survey of the magazine's HIV-positive readership, reducing their voluminous responses down to a few essential principles by which we PWA's can evaluate the medical care we receive.

These are the basic issues to consider when you are selecting a doctor or thinking about switching providers:

1. **You need to feel comfortable with your doctor. You need to trust him.** Be aware that your doctor is essentially your employee. It's your health that's on the line. "Above all, will this person be judgmental about your life? Run for the hills at the first raised eyebrow... If [your doctor] isn't open-minded about complementary strategies you find useful, watch out for difficulties down the road." But bear in mind also that "a doctor should be able to tell you what you don't want to hear when you need to hear it most."

2. **In some way, shape or form, your doctor gets paid for seeing you. You have a right, regardless of your financial circumstances, to be treated like a fully paying customer.** Your doctor should be willing to go all out to get you the treatment you want. You should never hear, "You can't afford that," or "That drug is too difficult for you to get." Or, worst of all, "I refuse to help you explore that treatment option."

3. **A caregiver's willingness to spend as much time as needed reviewing new information, answering questions or explaining a test — again and again if needed — might be more important than getting to the train on time.** In other words, delays are the likely price you'll pay for the quality of service your condition demands. A good patient must be patient, so on this point, cut your doctor a little slack.

4. **Your physician must be willing to involve you in your own care.** According to the poll, this was crucial to nearly every PWA who responded. Your doctor must be willing to listen to your ideas and say "I don't know" if you have questions she doesn't have the answers to. There is so much happening so quickly on the research front, that a good doctor will often need to do some homework to keep you up to date. But you must not be afraid to challenge her. A good physician "understands that, while expected to suggest a well-informed course of action, the final decision is yours."

5. **Given the immense**

Resurrecting the Body Politic by John Hannah

psychological needs and emotional complexity of life with HIV, things personal can't be entirely ignored. Your doctor

Is your medical team up to the task?

should be willing to talk to you about the impact of HIV on any and all facets of your life. Here again, if you sense that he is uncomfortable with or dismissive of your concerns, get outta there.

6. **No person with HIV can afford to receive medical care that is not absolutely state-of-the-art from a physician who is not up-to-the-minute in the latest developments in the use of new drugs.** An AIDS practitioner who describes her methodology as "conservative" is in the wrong line of work and would do well to go into podiatry, or some specialty where lives are not on the line.

Information of this kind, gleaned from the direct experience of other PWA's across the country and around the world, is one of the most vital resources we have in our continuing struggle to stay healthy and survive this epidemic. Here in Vermont, where the HIV-positive population is relatively small and widely dispersed, it is doubly important that we strive to share what we've learned in order to bolster one another on a road that is very hard and at times can seem terribly lonely.

In the past, I've made no secret of my concerns with the policies of Fletcher Allen's Comprehensive Care Clinic. Roughly a year ago, I left Fletcher Allen and began getting primary treatment for my HIV at the Burlington Community Health Center. It wasn't an easy decision to make. The facilities of the Health Center seemed pretty humble in comparison to the solid, institutional atmosphere of the CCC. Furthermore, the case-load of HIV-positive patients at the Health Center is small next to the hundreds of PWA's who pass through the CCC.

But, on every one of the above points, the Health Center has scored a perfect 10. My primary care provider, David Heckscher, like everyone I've dealt with at the Health Center, is totally committed to my receiving the very best care I can get. He treats me with respect and sensitivity and we have an excellent rapport. Our relationship is fundamentally informative and reciprocal. When I've

expressed interest in treatment strategies he's not familiar with, he gets on the "Warm Line" to San Francisco General Hospital and finds out what we need to know. David is already very knowledgeable when it comes to HIV, yet it is not uncommon for him to speak with these experts for one or two hours at a time to ferret out the possible causes of difficulties I've encountered with medications and their side-effects. Furthermore, with the help of Pat Parker, the Health Center's resident social worker, he makes damn sure I get the medications and counseling I need, whether I can afford to pay for them or not. David doesn't pull any punches. If he feels that I'm not handling some aspect of my health as well as I might be, he gives it to me right between the eyes. He does not judge me on any level. When I walk into that somewhat shabby little building on Riverside Avenue, I know that I'm getting the best medical care available anywhere. I am in charge of my treatment and I have a first-rate team behind me. And I am pleased to say that the proof is indeed in the pudding. I've never felt better in my life.

HIV-related issues aside, the Community Health Center is predicated on, and lives up to, sound principles of socialized medicine. You only pay what you can afford. Whatever your gender, age, sexual preference or cultural background, you will get the same thorough attention and prompt treatment.

My partner and I go the Health Center weekly for Vitamin B-12 and testosterone shots. It is always a treat, no matter how grumpy we may be beforehand, to be there. We've gotten to know all the nurses and the staff at the front desk and we're greeted with good humor and genuine warmth every time we see them. Never underestimate the power of human kindness. It's all the more impressive, considering the long hours these excellent folks put in. (I must add that Nancy, who commands the appointment desk, is a goddess. I firmly believe that two minute's conversation with this woman, once a week, will bring anyone's viral load down a notch or two.)

HIV is an affliction of both the body and the soul. Make sure your medical team is up to the task. At the Burlington Community Health Center, you will be treated fully and well. It is definitely worth checking out. Tell 'em John sent you.

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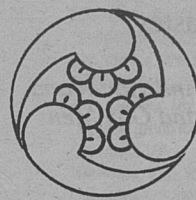
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