Your Poor Doctor

When you think of doctors, you might think they make tons of money, live in elegant homes, drive luxury cars, and play squash at cushy health clubs. At the office, they visit each patient for only a few minutes at a time, leaving the practical details for their staff. Pharmaceutical companies send them on junkets to tropical islands; in their time off, they relax at their beach houses and vacation in Tuscany.

Sure, the average American doctor earns around $200,000. But he or she also carries a mountain of debt from medical school and pays through the nose for malpractice insurance. These doctors treat 15 to 20 (or more) patients per day, conducting one consult every 15 minutes. The rest of their time is loaded down with paperwork, phone calls, studying, and the minutiae of running an office. A typical doctor has 2,000 to 2,500 patients on the books. No wonder a 2015 study showed that nearly half of American doctors feel burned out.

If you were a doctor, would you be able to stay up-to-the-minute on new research in your specialty? Would you remember all your patients’ cases, not to mention their test results and medications? Would you be able to make the right diagnosis and determine the best course of treatment each and every time? Or might you be tempted to bluff a little and take a few shortcuts?
WHY DOCTORS LIE

Most doctors are committed to giving the best possible care to all their patients, no matter the circumstances. But tired, worried, or egotistical MDs sometimes fudge the facts or simply lie to their patients. A 2013 Harvard Medical School study showed that at least 1 in 10 doctors had lied to a patient in the past year.

Whatever their reasons are, doctors can lie to patients in many ways, including:

- Recommending an expensive new medication or procedure rather than a cheaper approach because the manufacturer is giving him or her kickbacks or other perks
- Concealing or inflating the risks or benefits of certain treatment options in order to steer you toward his or her preferred course of action
- Giving you short and easy—but not entirely true or complete—answers in order to conclude your visit faster
- Faking his or her way through a consult because he or she is too arrogant to say “I don’t know”
- Downplaying or withholding difficult information when delivering bad news because he or she is uncomfortable with the conversation
- Covering up medical errors to avoid embarrassment, reprimands, or lawsuits
HOW TO TELL WHEN YOUR DOCTOR IS LYING TO YOU

Whenever you go to the doctor, it’s important to pay attention to what you see and hear. First and foremost, you need to grasp what’s going on and understand what your doctor is telling you. Patients who have an accurate and thorough understanding of their condition are more likely to benefit from the treatment their doctor prescribes. There is also a correlation between healing and your level of confidence in your doctor. If you sense that your doctor might be lying to you, you won’t trust him or her.

So, how can you tell if your doctor is lying? Here are the biggest clues:

- **Body language:** Does your doctor avoid eye contact, speak or act oddly, or seem anxious? These cues might raise a red flag.

- **Caginess:** Does your doctor oppose your intention to get an independent second opinion? Does he or she insist that you get your second opinion from a particular colleague? He or she might be afraid that his or her judgment will be called into question, and that you might end up switching doctors.

- **Condescension:** Does your doctor discourage your efforts to learn more about your condition and take an active role in your treatment? Is he or she unwilling to take your comments or suggestions seriously? This might be your doctor’s way of taking control and making decisions without your input.

- **Impatience:** Is your doctor annoyed by your questions or unwilling to give you straight answers? Does he or she rush through your appointments? This could mean that your doctor doesn’t care about his or her patients.

- **Inflexibility:** Does your doctor insist that you follow one particular treatment instead of another? Does he or she reject your request to use a proven, less expensive treatment? Maybe he or she is in the pocket of a pharmaceutical or medical supply company.
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WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

Are you worried that your doctor might be lying to you? The quickest—and usually best—solution is to switch doctors.

If switching doctors is not an option, try some of the following:

› Before your appointments, talk to other patients who have been in your shoes. Make sure you’re getting the same advice from your doctor as everyone else. Check the authoritative websites of nationally recognized medical institutions to find out what the typical treatment is.

› During examinations, ask your doctor to explain each step and how it relates to your diagnosis. Ask the doctor to slow down if you feel he or she isn’t being clear.

› Insist that your doctor explain his or her findings and recommendations in detail, using plain English. Why do you need that test? What does that medication do, and what are its side effects? What lies ahead? What’s your prognosis? Ask questions and take notes.

› Bring a trusted friend or family member to your appointments as a reality check. They’re more likely to remember what your doctor says and does. Encourage them to ask questions.

› Get a second opinion from an independent doctor. Their judgment may be the same or different; remember that the second opinion is no more or less likely to be accurate than the first.
GOOD DOCTORS ALWAYS DO THIS!

Good, honest doctors play many different roles. See if you recognize your doctor in this list.

Good doctors are:

- **Listeners**: They let you talk and listen to what you say. They take a genuine interest in your answers to their questions.
- **Communicators**: They answer your questions, conveying information in language you can understand.
- **Educators**: Before taking action, they explain the whats and whys.
- **Caregivers**: They’re sensitive and hands-on, no matter who you are. They respect your values and wishes.
- **Advisors**: They give unbiased advice about your specific needs based on the best intelligence.
- **Supporters**: They’re there when you need them. They’re your proactive health care advocates.
- **Coaches**: They encourage you to participate in decisions, and they acknowledge that you have the ultimate say-so.
- **Collaborators**: They work cooperatively with multi-talented teams, involving other doctors as well as nurses, social workers, and other health practitioners.
- **Wellness advocates**: They help you maintain your health, not just recover from disease.
- **Learners**: They constantly update their education. They’re open-minded about new developments. They’re willing to learn from anyone.