

Medical Confessions

If you ever wanted to know how to bypass the receptionist at the doctor's surgery or whether your doctor believes men are better patients than women, then read the following article which is an interview with five doctors in the UK.

1 a Before you read the article, answer the questions yourself.

- 1 When are the best and worst times to be admitted to hospital?
- 2 If I go to a major teaching hospital, will I get a better doctor?
- 3 People complain that hospitals are dehumanising. Are they?
- 4 How can you speed up getting an appointment with a busy consultant?
- 5 Why do patients have to sit for so long in waiting rooms?
- 6 How can you ensure that a doctor takes you seriously?
- 7 Is it a good idea to buy your doctor a thank-you present?
- 8 Are most doctors good at what they do?
- 9 What's the most common mistake that doctors make?
- 10 Are you annoyed when a patient wants a second opinion?
- 11 Are doctors arrogant?
- 12 Do men or women make better patients?

b Now compare your answers with those of five NHS doctors in the UK. As you read underline any points that surprise or are new to you.

Dr Everything (General practice)	Dr Cancer (Oncology)	Dr Mind (Psychiatry)
Dr Child (Paediatrics)	Dr Gynae (Women's health)	

1 When are the best and worst times to be admitted to hospital?

Dr Cancer Worst time: junior doctor handover in the first weeks of February and August.

Dr Mind Worst time is Friday and Saturday night when the drunken kids are out beating themselves up, crashing cars and overloading hospitals.

Dr Child A&E is very unpredictable. Urgent situations will be dealt with quickly, regardless of how busy the department is.

Dr Everything Best time is when there is no alternative. Worst time is on Christmas Eve or Good Friday with an unknown condition. Hospitals are understaffed over weekends and bank holidays. Usually cover is arranged for junior staff, but consultant rounds are rare and haphazard.

2 If I go to a major teaching hospital, will I get a better doctor?

Dr Everything You will get more learned [specialist] consultants who can distinguish between dermatofibrosarcoma [a potentially malignant skin tumour] and a mole, but you might not get an experienced generalist who can quickly assure you that the dizzy spells, shortness of breath, tingling in your lips, hands and feet are the effects of a panic attack, as opposed to those of phaeochromocytoma [adrenal gland tumour], without inserting certain probes.

Dr Cancer You will generally get better junior doctors looking after you, which makes all the difference.

Dr Mind Many teaching-hospital doctors are preoccupied with research, publishing papers and advancing their academic careers. Watch out for these.

3 People complain that hospitals are dehumanising. Are they?

Dr Gynae Lack of privacy and poor food are problems, but the real crisis is shortage of nurses.

Dr Cancer When you see the effort that goes into some patients, you would say no. However, parts of the NHS with high throughput are always going to be slightly dehumanising.

4 How can you speed up getting an appointment with a busy consultant?

Dr Cancer Phone up their private secretary and offer to see him/her as a private patient. The patients who get seen the quickest are either the nice, friendly ones or the really aggressive ones (who kick up a fuss until they are seen). The former get the best care.

Dr Gynae Call their secretary, and say you will take a last-minute cancellation. On a typical clinic list of 20 patients, three or four won't arrive, and some will cancel in advance.

Dr Child Choose and Book (chooseandbook.nhs.uk) should allow the patient to determine the approximate waiting lists of different consultants, and pick shorter ones. Hassling the consultant's secretary by telephone is unlikely to make you popular.

Dr Everything GPs are sympathetic to patients' clinical needs – and specialists' interests. If an elderly, otherwise able lady is crippled with arthritis in her hips, her GP may try to expedite her appointment with an orthopaedic surgeon with an interest in hip-replacement surgery. However, if a fit middle-aged gentleman has painful feet and is seeking assistance with the New York Marathon ...

5 Why do patients have to sit for so long in waiting rooms?

Dr Everything In general practice it may well have to do with a number of factors, such as the GP starting late or the GP dealing with emergencies. And not all problems can be shoehorned into a 10-minute consultation. Many are complex – mental-health issues, grief, cancer and sick children to name but a few. Some GPs teach their patients to book double appointments if their problems are tricky, while others may have queues of patients checking about the flu.

Dr Gynae Patients are often given appointment times of 15 minutes earlier than their actual appointment to compensate for parking problems at hospitals.

Dr Child Doctors often arrive late at clinic because of work commitments on the ward or elsewhere, or following a desperate bid to squeeze in lunch. Some clinics have a crazy system whereby everyone arrives at once and is seen on a 'first come, first served' basis. This is worth complaining about.

Dr Cancer Usually because someone has allocated too-small time slots, or because members of the team are away. If you have had to wait, don't berate the doctor as it only slows things down even more.

6 How can you ensure that a doctor takes you seriously?

Dr Cancer Bringing someone with you can help.

Dr Mind Be clear about what you want and don't spend a long time telling him or her about irrelevant things.

Dr Gynae Everyone who sits in front of a doctor is nervous and vulnerable, and it is our job to take all patients seriously. Of course, some are swinging the lead, and very busy doctors, GPs especially, will be less tolerant of time-wasting.

Dr Everything Write a note to your doctor; tell them all your concerns and what impact the problem has had on your daily activities; don't get up from the chair until you've had an answer to your concerns.

7 Is it a good idea to buy your doctor a thank-you present?

Dr Everything I don't feel comfortable with gifts. A good way to tell your doctor how you feel is a note or card. This also helps your doctor at their appraisal when they have to persuade other doctors that they don't suck at their jobs.

Dr Child There are strict guidelines as to what a doctor can accept, and anything of significant value should be declined. Chocolates or biscuits go down well because they can be shared among the team.

Dr Mind I like gifts when they're appropriate. Medicine is very personal and it's great to be thanked for doing something good for a patient.

Dr Cancer Doctors will appreciate a token such as a card and a box of chocolates.

Dr Gynae I receive a lot of lovely cards, and it gives my day a lift to open one. I get some chocolates and wine at Christmas, but gifts can actually be a nuisance – I'm very busy and must find time to reply.

8 Are most doctors good at what they do?

Dr Everything I believe so. After all, they all passed punishing tests.

Dr Child There are very few "bad" doctors out there. But obviously there is variation between individuals in terms of theoretical knowledge, practical abilities and bedside manner.

Dr Gynae Most are better than good, and striving to be better. Problems only tend to occur alongside personal difficulties such as depression, divorce or alcohol, at which point colleagues and partners must be aware and report.

9 What's the most common mistake that doctors make?

Dr Cancer Not really listening to what their patients are saying.

Dr Mind Assuming that they've summed up the patient early on – and then failing to review this.

Dr Everything The insurance companies tell us it's lack of communication.

Dr Child Probably either failing to wash their hands between patients or drug-prescribing errors. The latter is a particular issue in paediatrics when doses are based on weight.

10 Are you annoyed when a patient wants a second opinion?

Dr Mind I welcome second opinions.

Dr Gynae I am slightly irritated if it seems the patient has a lack of confidence in me.

Dr Cancer No. I think it is important for the patient to have complete trust in their doctor and their treatment.

Dr Child If the request comes in the context of genuine concern, that's fine. Most patients here will be seen by more than one doctor anyway.

Dr Everything Definitely not. If I am proved right, that can be an ego rush; but the most valuable times are when I am wrong, and I can figure out how it could have gone better and what I didn't know. Good patient relationships have come out of me replying honestly about where I think things went wrong and what I would do to improve the situation.

11 Are doctors arrogant?

Dr Everything Of course not!

Dr Cancer A lot of doctors use a veneer of arrogance as a means of hiding their own feelings of inadequacy. A bit of arrogance helps protect you from becoming roadkill, but when it seeps into how you handle your patients, it is dangerous.

Dr Gynae Doctors are used to making decisions, and decision-makers plough a different furrow to most people. "Arrogant" is too derogatory a term for this.

12 Do men or women make better patients?

Dr Mind It is unfashionable to say so but I find men as good as women at being patients.

Dr Everything Women argue but take advice; men accept advice but rarely follow it.

Dr Cancer I've seen good and bad examples from both sexes.

Adapted from Interviews by Robert Hudson, *The Guardian*, 4 February 2008 Copyright © Guardian News & Media Ltd.

2 In pairs discuss the following questions.

- 1 Which of the answers given by the NHS doctors surprised you the most? Why?
- 2 What factors in any might have influenced their responses? (E.g. their age)
- 3 Obviously these answers differ depending on the individual doctors, but cultural factors must play a role. Are there any questions that you think would have got different responses from doctors in your country?

Out & About**EITHER**

Choose 5 questions from the list above that interest you particularly and survey your friends and colleagues. It might be interesting to ask the same questions to people outside the medical profession and compare the results.

OR

Devise a list of 5–10 questions asking for opinions on other aspects of the healthcare system you work in and ask colleagues in the medical profession to respond.

Compare your findings with the rest of the group next time you meet.