Chapter 3
How to Get the Best Out of Your Health Care System

Knowledge is the most important aspect of treating any disease. In order to get the best medical help for your MS; the first step is to learn as much as you possibly can. Read this book thoroughly. Get on the Internet - all libraries have computers available if you do not have access to one. Check out everything you can find. Then discuss your findings with your doctor.

You will have a long-term relationship with your doctor; therefore make sure you find one with whom you are comfortable. Do not hesitate to ask questions during your appointments. If questions arise between visits, call the doctor's office and state what is concerning you. The doctor may not respond directly, but someone should get back to you with answers.

If you are not satisfied with how your illness is being handled, you may wish to seek another physician. If your choice of doctor hinges on the type of insurance you have, explain your concerns about the care you are receiving. Communication is an important factor in the doctor-patient relationship.

Once you have chosen a physician to be your primary MS care provider, there are some basic guidelines to assure effective office visits:

State your reasons for the visit clearly and up front.

Make a list of the questions you would like to have answered.

Try to estimate how much time will be needed to address questions with the doctor, and recognize that there is almost always a time crunch in a doctor's office. Ask for additional time, if necessary, when making the appointment, and be prepared to pay for this extra time. (You may want to ask your questions rather than have a physical examination during some of your appointments.) You will be asked to sign a request authoring the release of medical records from other health care
providers to be made available to your doctor's office. It is very important that your records be received prior to your first visit in order to allow your physician to make the most informed recommendation for your care. Anticipate the information a physician may require and be prepared with answers for questions such as:

- When did your symptoms begin?
- How long have they been going on?
- What do they feel like to you?
- What treatments have you tried for these symptoms, including any alternative or complementary medicine?
- What was your response to the treatment?

You should feel comfortable calling your physician's office when symptoms occur that you do not understand. Some patients hesitate to call, feeling their symptoms may not warrant attention or that the doctor may be too busy. This can result in problems. For example, symptoms of an early urinary tract infection can be easily treated. However, if you wait until the infection is severe, treatment is difficult and the consequences can be severe.

A good doctor-patient partnership is critical, and positive reinforcement can go a long way toward achieving that kind of relationship. Try to make the interactions with the doctor as personal as possible. Begin with a handshake, if appropriate, or warm greeting. Give positive feedback on specific actions that were helpful to you. The goal is to establish a partnership that involves understanding, mutual respect, and trust. These same principles are applicable to other aspects of the health care system as well.

Getting the most out of your medical care may also involve the attention to some non-medical issues:

Become an expert on your own insurance plan and identify someone in the insurance office to answer questions. Be aware of changes as they occur in your insurance plan as they may radically change the way your doctor's office provides your care.
Establish a relationship with someone in the physician's office to help in this area as well. Usually your doctor's office staff is attempting to manage many patients with a huge variety of insurance companies and individual plans. Your doctor's office staff may not be aware of recent changes that have occurred in your plan.

- Keep a running account of issues that have been discussed and with whom.
- Clarify pre-authorization requirements before any medical procedures are performed.
- If you are unclear about a recommendation when you get home, call back to clarify the issues before you proceed.
- Get information in writing, if possible.

In choosing various health insurance policies, try to find plans that incorporate a wide array of services that your doctor might prescribe in managing your MS. Those may include rehabilitation therapies, medications, and medical equipment. A comprehensive health insurance plan is a very important part of managing multiple sclerosis.

In summary, careful planning, communication, and documentation can help you get the most out of your health care system and result in optimal care.