

cultural diversity in medicine

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From Dr. Welby to Web MD: How Different Generations View Healthcare

Introduction

In today's healthcare environment, not only are there several generations participating in the medical workforce but practitioners encounter these multiple generations as patients. As each age group is a byproduct of their physical and social upbringings, they all have their own language and expectations. While it is important not to over simplify and lump all generations together, there are similarities in how different age groups anticipate their office time with providers. The following offers guidelines on the potential needs of each age group and recommendations in navigating these often uncertain waters.

The Pre-Boomers

The generation born before 1946, labeled the pre-Boomers, remember doctors who made house calls and carried a mini pharmacy in their trusty black bags. Formularies, HMOs, medical specialists, midlevel providers and generic medications were not in existence and their concepts are difficult for this group to grasp.

They have relied heavily upon their physicians for advice. Any problem, even something minor, warranted a call to the doctor. However, as these patients entered their senior years, they have been forced to adapt to the abrupt changes in healthcare fueled by HMOs and self-health movements that turned the tables on them without warning. Now the individual is responsible for his or her own health.

However, this generation still continues to seek, and need, a personal relationship with their healthcare provider. They remember when the doctor's office was staffed by three people, who all knew them and their concerns. Imagine, then, what it is like for them to enter today's system where the front desk staff greets

the patient while wearing a phone headset, and patients are forced to stand behind a line for privacy concerns. As a group, pre-Boomers do not routinely utilize the Internet for medical information; however, they can still quote verbatim from *Reader's Digest*.

It is important to remember that this group needs more time with their provider. For example, a simple medical history is not always that simple. Keep in mind, when asked about previous surgeries, hospitalizations, etc., this generation has over seven decades to review. Allow them the time to do so. Do not be brusque or interrupt as this age group values manners and needs to feel they are respected. Remember, too, their hearing may be diminished. Make certain they understand what is being said and prescribed. Arrange for proper follow-up.

Boomers

Born between 1946 and 1959, Boomers represent the largest population ever born in the US. Retirement is on their horizon, and some are now confronting the chronic diseases that come with age. Strong social skills are the hallmark of this generation. They have witnessed firsthand the explosion of technology and information in healthcare.

This generation definitely has a strong understanding of what it means to be responsible for your own health. Consequently, Boomers will utilize the Internet to check out labs and diagnosis, yet they remain reliant on a provider for interpretation. This group of "early seniors" demands more from their provider in the way of disease education, explanation of medications and their potential side effects, in addition to diagnostic availabilities and potential treatment options. They, too, need time with their provider, but they also need information.

Guide them to available resources and encourage their involvement in their healthcare treatments and decisions.

Cuspers

Cuspers are defined as those born between 1960 and 1968, after the baby boom and on the cusp of Generation X. This is an interesting group of adults who take increased ownership of their personal health yet do not possess a blind faith in medicine. Capitation and insurance regulations are common to them, and they will seek out generics and other discount options. They are savvy with technology and embrace it more readily than the two previous generations. They need less time from their practitioner, but they want to be empowered. They require information and inclusion.

Generation X

This generation, 1969–1977, grew up in a “drive-through” world: banking, fast food, dry cleaning, etc. Consequently, they want fast results. They expect quick turnaround times at the doctor’s office and are willingly to pay the extra cost and go out of the area of their HMO if they can get quicker service. They also want the latest, most state-of-the-art technology. They are not going to ask what a CT scan is, most of them will know. Instead, they will ask, “How old is your CT scanner and is this a test I can get done during my lunch hour?”

This generation does not place trust in a system that is bloated and bureaucratic. Being young adults, they retain the sense of being immortal and often go without healthcare benefits in lieu of other perks a job may offer. They are not awestruck by hierarchy because they grew up without it. They prefer to be on a first-name basis with their providers and will be thrown by someone demanding otherwise. This generation embraces and wants access to all types of medicine and treatment modalities.

Millennials

The Millennials, born 1978 through the present, may still be struggling with first independence from parents. They are the second generation to grow up in an instantaneous world and seek healthcare that is available 24/7. They will access the local Emergency Department versus waiting for hours at an ambulatory care center. This generation, more than any other, will seek out information from the Internet, and Web MD

is a favorite resource. Interestingly, they view their local healthcare provider as little more than someone to offer affirmation of what they have read on the Web. This generation tends to define illness in terms of the limitations it places on their daily activities and look for the “quick fix.” Many in this generation do not expect a personal relationship with a healthcare provider as they see different ones with each illness. Instead, speed and technology are what they value.

Conclusion

The increased access to on-line personal health information and the continued explosion of technology and rapid breakthroughs in research requires providers and consumers to continually readjust their expectations of the healthcare experience.

Healthcare providers must be aware of the needs of their patients, not just in terms of their medical conditions but also their social expectations. What is apparent from several studies on the different generations is our older patients want to be listened to and to have time taken with them, while our younger patients, the majority of whom are not yet burdened with chronic illnesses, are seeking immediate results.

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Suggested Readings

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