



Commentary

Choosing the right surgeon



The surgeon-patient relationship is unique in many aspects. Patients want a surgeon that is not only superbly skilled, but also fully committed to seeing them through the operation and any potential complications. Surgery is inherently different from other fields of medicine. Undergoing an operation is one of the most invasive acts one can subject himself to. It puts the patients in an extremely vulnerable position, and forces them to entrust their lives to the surgeon-an individual that they barely know. Why patients choose a particular surgeon, and how they develop this deep trust, is a complex process that is clearly worth studying.

Admittedly, healthcare decisions are impacted by a variety of factors such as patient coverage, economic considerations, regional systems, and network availability. However, for an elective procedure patients almost universally have a choice on whom will operate on them and patients often have to make these decisions after only one interaction with the surgeon. Previous work in attempting to understand how patients choose their surgical provider has posited surgeon experience and reputation [1] as the most important factors, while other studies suggested hospital factors [2] may be determinant behind patient choice. Furthermore, with the proliferation of the digital age and social media patients have an unprecedented access to information about surgeons. There is already some evidence that the public is becoming more aware of the innumerable online physician ratings online sites of varying quality and that patients are starting to incorporate this into surgeon selection [3]. Doctors should know how patients choose their surgeon in order to modify behavior and training for the future.

Aydin et al. [4]. Investigate what motivates patients' selection of their surgeon within their health system that provides patients with a significant amount of freedom to choose operating surgeons. They administered an extensive questionnaire and conducted face to face interviews of 200 patients undergoing elective surgery at their tertiary care center to better understand which factors determined surgeon selection. Responses were grouped into 4 main categories: 1) Attitude of the physician (communication skills, time spent with the patient) 2) Reputation (recommendation of former patients or other physicians) 3) Professional experience (subspecialty training in the field) 4) Online presence (advertisements, virtual comments, social media presence).

Attitude of the physician or interpersonal skills was by far the most important factor for patients when selecting their surgeon, with 83% of the respondents indicating it was very important. This was in comparison to only 67% and 58% of respondents who found professional experience and physician reputation very important. Interestingly, while nearly all the patients reported doing internet research on surgeons, online presence was by far the least influential factor with only 26% of patients deeming it very important.

This article is limited because 1) its results are from a single institution within a specific healthcare system and 2) the definition of elective procedures is unknown and patients were undergoing procedures in vastly different specialties (neurosurgery, general surgery, cardiac surgery, urology and orthopedics) making it difficult to generalize the results. However, surgery will always be an intimate interaction between a surgeon and a willing patient. Therefore, it is valuable to know that among various factors, patients select surgeons whom they like and connect with. The next step would be to see if the type of surgery (cancer resection vs hernia) or different health care setting produces similar results using this comprehensive framework.

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