The Accidental Gynecologist

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Full disclosure here: I'm not a gynecologist. I don't pretend to be. I don't even play one on TV. For that matter, the last time I delivered a baby was sometime in the last century. I am proud to be a family physician and certainly women's health is an important part of what I do, but I'm no gynecologist. It's actually a distinction I'm rather proud of. The gynecologists immerse themselves in women's health—everything from cancer surveillance and treatment, to detailed discussions about menopause and beyond. They are, after all, the experts. Me, well, let's just say that I'm pretty good at it, but I also do a fine job at lancing abscesses, stitching up lacerations, treating ear infections, or battling diabetes. Yes, that's me, a family physician, a jack-of-all-trades, the doctor who specializes in being a generalist. That is until recently.

Not long ago, a new patient came to see me for her annual exam. She was looking for a new doctor, and I had met the most important criterion: I was a preferred provider on her insurance plan. I greeted her warmly, asked about her concerns, even engaged in some small talk to put her at ease. After all, she was about to submit to the most invasive of exams short of a colonoscopy and had just met me. I think it's important to take the time to talk with patients, find out about their interests and vocations and demonstrate that they're not just medical specimens but people.

Apparently, at this particular visit, I passed muster. Shortly afterward, she wrote an amazingly glowing account of her appointment with me on one of those Web sites devoted to consumer reviews. She went into more detail about her exam than one would commonly expect, certainly too detailed for a family newspaper. In a sense, it's funny, when you think about it. New to town? Looking for good Greek food? Try Taki's. Place to get a great haircut, well, that would be so and so? Oh, and are you overdue for your Pap smear, well Dr Dudley's your man. She referred to me as a gynecologist and set the ball rolling. Sure enough, it wasn't too long until another new patient came in.

"How did you hear about me?"

"On the Internet."

I quickly said that I appreciated her choosing the clinic but had to make one thing clear up front, that I wasn't a gynecologist but that women's health was an important part of my practice. No matter, never mind, have at it, Doc. Sure enough, another good review, and I was off to the races; my fate had been sealed.

I never set out to be a gynecologist. As a matter of fact, initially, I promoted myself as a family doctor whose special interest was in pediatrics. I particularly like caring for children. After all, I used to be a child once. I understand them. I understand how they don't like going to the doctor, about as much as dogs dislike going to the vet. I try hard to make going to the doctor a positive experience. I have even gotten quite good at making a sound like Donald Duck when I peer into their ears. That always gets a laugh.

However, as happy as the kids are after their visits with me, not one of them hightails it home to post a glowing review online about how the nice doctor looked in his ear, quacked like a duck, and made his owie go away. It just doesn't happen.

In family medicine, we are trained to take care of patients of all ages, “from cradle to grave,” as we used to say in residency. I am proud to say that I have a wide range of patients, from newborns all the way up to a very spry 105 year old who looks 80 at most. That's one thing I like about family medicine: the variety of patients, each with a different story, each at a different stage in life.

Although I do indeed welcome patients of all ages, I don't really have any choice over who comes through my door, young or old, male or female. It's the patients who pick me, not the other way around. I always feel honored when a new patient arrives, having chosen me as their doctor. In all cases, I try hard to be

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worthy of their trust and respect. Though I am indeed a doctor who specializes in being a generalist, it’s also true that I’ve had quite an influx of female patients thanks to a smattering of kind comments online. They are all delightful, and I am indeed happy that they picked me over the “real” gynecologist three doors down. I think the trend will continue. After all, I haven’t seen a single review yet after a man had his annual prostate exam.

So, I welcome female patients. I will say, however, that I stop short of making the Donald Duck sound as I pick up the speculum before the exam, even though the blades do bear a striking resemblance to a duck’s bill. I’m not a gynecologist. I don’t pretend to be. But the Internet has made me one.

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