

You and your doctor

Last updated April 2011/ Due for review June 2012

It's likely that you'll see a lot of your specialist HIV doctor. The relationship you forge with your doctor is one of the most important you will have post-diagnosis.

It's therefore important that you find the right kind of doctor for you. Friends may be able to recommend a suitable doctor, but building up a relationship will take time. You may not develop a rapport with the first doctor you meet. Establishing a trusting relationship with your doctor is essential if you are to feel a sense of self-empowerment and control over your use of treatments.

Effective doctors

It is very important that your doctor has well-developed interpersonal skills, and many do. The level of knowledge of your doctor is important too. An effective doctor should take the trouble to explain things to you, be sensitive to personal issues raised by you, be a good listener and be able to provide you with a range of options.

All patients need their doctor to be open, frank and communicative, being clear when he or she does not know the answer to your questions.

Effective patients

To be an effective patient you will need to be involved in your own care. Exactly what this means depends on the type of person you are. Some people will want to take a more active role in their health care and have clear ideas about what kind of treatments they do or do not want to use. Others will be more inclined to look to their doctor for guidance.

Being prepared for your consultations is a joint responsibility. It's a good idea to ask questions until you understand. If you are likely to forget what your doctor tells you then you might find it useful to make notes. If you are likely to forget which questions you would like to ask, then try writing a letter to your doctor containing the questions you want to ask, and send it in advance of your appointment. It's also worth remembering that if you attend your clinic without an appointment, your regular doctor may not be available.

Participation and partnership

During the course of your relationship, it's likely there will occasionally be issues upon which you and your doctor do not agree. It's important that you learn how to manage these situations. If you become unhappy over a disagreement with your doctor, you may choose to invite a patient advocate to help you communicate your feelings.

Some hospitals may have a nominated advocate available, or your local HIV organisation should be able to help. In extreme cases, if you wish to pursue a complaint you should address this to the clinic director by letter. If you decide you are no longer happy to continue your relationship with your doctor, this need not be a reason to move to another clinic – most clinics allow switching between doctors. In the UK you can choose the clinic you at which you are treated and you can switch your care to another hospital in your area providing HIV services (if there is one) or even another city.

It is important to be honest with your doctor about the way you live your life. Knowing the facts helps your doctor to consider appropriate care and treatment for you. If, however, you feel unable to confide in your doctor about certain issues, there may be other staff in the department who you might be able to talk to more easily.

Maintaining contact with the same doctor can be extremely difficult, as they are usually very busy, and staff change from time to time. Remember though, their time is no more valuable than your own. If getting access to your doctor is difficult, discuss ways of improving the situation. Would a short phone call, or email enquiry be acceptable?

Learning about the roles of other staff at your treatment centre will also help you avoid using your doctor's time when another member of staff

would be able to help, and can provide you with additional sources of support (see the factsheets on HIV clinic services and visiting your HIV clinic for more details). For some non-HIV related medical problems it might be more appropriate to see a GP, and NAM has a factsheet on GPs that provides some useful tips on finding and using a GP.