
AN OPEN LETTER TO ALL DOCTORS

Dear Doctor,

As your patient, I feel fortunate to be working with you and believe our partnership will provide the best possible outcome. Your knowledge and experience combined with my commitment and determination will make it happen. I look forward to our relationship.

Besides being a patient, I am a daughter, wife, and mother. Before I became a patient, I was a business professional. My makeup – family, childhood, education, work experience, relationships, values – defines me as unique. Because I am an individual, I do not fit some cookie-cutter mold that says I will respond in a certain way to my illness. Please treat me accordingly.

You may think that I am in denial over my illness. Understand that my mind hasn't yet grasped what has happened to my body. Let me ask the questions before you provide the answers. That way, I can come to understand what has happened to me and accept it on those terms. Then work with me to set goals that I can measure to see results.

I recognize that the insurance companies dictate how health care is dispensed and that is why your schedule is so tight, often causing you to fall behind. I'm all too familiar with waiting rooms. Those of us who are patients must by definition be patient. I do appreciate it, though, when you acknowledge the time I've spent waiting. While my time with you in consultation may be limited, remember that I and my loved ones must cope with my illness 24x7. With that in mind, you can greatly relieve my anxiety by setting my expectations with respect to follow-up and future contact, be it another appointment, phone call, e-mail or something else. You might also consider providing a handout such as a list of frequently asked questions, websites, or reference materials that offer additional information about my condition. This would help to reduce my uncertainty and make our time together more productive.

Something else I would ask you always to be sensitive to – my dignity. Remember, above all else, I am a human being, not just a mass of protoplasm. Don't put a label on me because the classic symptoms of my illness predict a certain behavior, when what you are witnessing may just be a part of my personality. If you have grim news, lead me to it gently, but honestly, and always hold out hope. As my partner, I want you to share my motto: Positive outlook = positive outcome.

As a doctor, you are highly educated, but don't ignore that font of knowledge before you. Me. I've spent a lifetime in this body; I know it intimately. Ask me what I think. And when you acknowledge that you don't have all the answers, and that perhaps I should seek another opinion, I only admire you more, for your humility. After all, we all have a common goal, getting me well.

Thanks for hearing me out. I know I've put a lot on your plate, maybe more than your Hippocratic Oath prepared you for. But when you accept me as your patient, you also take on the role of educator, advisor, and confidant. One more thing: come equipped with a sense of humor. Sometimes, it can be the best medicine.

With Hope & Gratitude,

Your Patient