

Good Behavior



Center for Advancing Health

Active, Informed Patients: A New Wild Card

After spending weeks scouring the Web, consulting with her child's pediatrician and allergist, listening to TV doctors and quizzing her friends, my colleague has decided not to have her son vaccinated against H1N1 flu virus. She joins other mothers, pregnant women, health care workers worldwide and others in rejecting the public health messages about the importance and safety of the vaccine. She is a smart, savvy consumer of health care and this decision represents thoughtful consideration of a variety of information.

Her decision illustrates an accelerating trend: in response to a constant stream of messages urging people to become active participants in their health care and an equally steady stream of news reports on the uncertainty of science, conflicts of interest among doctors and the dangers of medical care, some people are doing just that.

I write a lot about how one of the unintended consequences of health care is the imposition of increased responsibility on individuals to make decisions and perform tasks that were formerly accomplished by professionals - particularly spelling out what this means for people who are frail and ill and vulnerable.

My colleague's H1N1 decision, however, comes from the other end of the engagement continuum: people who are curious, motivated and able and who know something about the progress and methods of science. We weigh the available evidence against our personal experiences, values and preferences and make a choice that may not agree with either our physician's expert recommendation or a population based public health agenda.

Those like this among us will not limit our consumer investigations to finding the cheapest X-ray for our sprained ankle or the best drug plan for our mom.

We will not restrict our demands for shared decision-making with our doctor only to those choices that promise similar outcomes with different side effects. Nope. We have responded to the imprecations that we become informed purchasers of value and ask questions, and we don't believe that any aspect of this service-delivery enterprise of health care is off-limits to our scrutiny.

Highly engaged patients demand a new kind of relationship with our physicians- one that requires flexibility, patience and humility, as we try to understand what is wrong with us and how what they recommend might - but might not -- help. We question their sources, experience and opinions of the latest JAMA article; we judge them based on the quality of their training and publications and ratings of their manners by other patients. And we may or may not follow their advice.

Those who exhort us to be more active in our care have made the easy assumption that if we do so, we will make the same decisions for ourselves that our clinicians and public health officials would have made for us: We will stop smoking, follow mammography guidelines, take our pills as directed and get the vaccinations. The considerable number of those who plan to refuse the H1N1 vaccine is proof that this assumption is false and that our engagement will unquestionably have an impact on our own health and the health of the public in unexpected ways.

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From the Health Behavior News Service

The Health Behavior News Service regularly distributes stories summarizing new research on health behavior issues. These stories can be found online at <http://www.cfah.org/hbns/current.cfm>

September News Stories:

- **CALLING ALL SMOKERS: CELL PHONES COULD HELP YOU QUIT** Hooked on your cell phone and cigarettes? Fortunately, your mobile device could help you kick the nicotine habit, according to a new review from New Zealand.
- **EXERCISE TRAINING AFTER STROKE HELPS PATIENTS WALK FASTER, LONGER** An updated Cochrane review finds that stroke patients who participate in a post-stroke walking program walk faster, longer and more independently than non-exercisers.
- **TWO MALARIA DRUGS FOR TRAVELERS HAVE FEWER SIDE EFFECTS** A new research review finds that a combination drug and the common antibiotic doxycycline allow travelers to fend off malaria with the fewest side effects in areas where the parasite is resistant to a widely accepted preventive treatment.
- **BULIMIA, BINGE EATING RESPOND TO TALK THERAPY** Although most people with bulimia and binge eating disorders wait many years before seeking help, a new review shows that psychological treatment can make a large difference.
- **OPIOIDS FOR OSTEOARTHRITIS: PROBLEMS FAR OUTWEIGH BENEFITS** Should you take opioid drugs for hip and knee pain caused by osteoarthritis? Probably not, suggests a new review of the best research on the subject.
- **TRAUMATIC CHILDHOOD MIGHT TAKE YEARS OFF ADULT LIFE** Children who were exposed to six or more “adverse childhood experiences” were at double the risk of premature death compared to children who had not suffered these experiences, CDC researchers found.