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CHAPTER 4

Choosing the Right Kind of Doctor

There are so many types of doctors and other health care providers who treat back pain that this entire chapter will be devoted to this subject. I also touch upon this subject in other chapters where it is appropriate to the problem, i.e., spine surgeon for surgery, pain management specialist for an epidural steroid injection, and physical therapist for pain control and improvement in strength, stamina, and balance. This chapter will be a specific description of the various specialties and services that are available to help you with your back problem.

Acute, intermittent, or chronic back pain may cause us to seek medical help in various ways. We can be carried to the emergency room of our local hospital in agony, or, if our back pain allows, we make an appointment to see a doctor at some time in the future. Depending on the type of medical insurance we have, HMO, PPO, or no insurance at all, we may go to our primary care physician, to the neighborhood chiropractor, or we may refer ourselves directly to a specialist such as an orthopaedic surgeon or physical therapist. Here are descriptions of most of the types of health care providers who manage back pain syndromes and the expertise that they can provide you.

I have seen people who have been treating their back pain by going directly to an acupuncturist or massage therapist only to find out that in doing so they delayed getting a timely diagnosis and treatment for a serious problem.

Emergency physician and acute back pain

If you seek help in an emergency room for acute back pain, the ER doctor will evaluate you to be sure you are not suffering from a serious life- or limb-threatening emergency such as cauda equina syndrome or an aneurysm (pages 30, 33). If you have a serious problem that requires admission to the hospital, they will immediately call in an appropriate specialist for your condition, i.e. a spinal surgeon for cauda equina syndrome, a urologist for a kidney stone, or a vascular surgeon for an aneurysm. If the ER doctor diagnoses you with an episode of acute back pain that is not life- or limb-threatening (idiopathic low-back pain, see page 29), he or she will then try to help you with pain medication, muscle relaxants, and/or anti-inflammatory medication and send you home with a recommendation to follow up with your primary care physician (PCP) or a specialist such as an orthopaedist.

When should I see my primary care physician for my back?

Most people who have an acute attack of back pain do not require emergency care and have time to go to a PCP to determine how to get relief. PCPs are trained in general medical diagnosis and treatment. Traditionally, PCPs are medical doctors or osteopathic doctors who are trained in general medical care but do not have specialty training (they are also called general practitioners). Family medicine specialists are medical or osteopathic physicians who take at least two additional years of training following four years of medical school and one year of internship in general medicine. General practitioners and family medicine specialists, along with internal medicine specialists (who have three additional years of residency training in general medicine), comprise the category of qualified PCPs who can determine what is causing your back pain.

Some people who are suffering from back pain go directly to a chiropractor, physical therapist, massage therapist, or acupuncturist for