

## FINDING THE DOCTOR WHO IS RIGHT FOR YOU

### TAKING A CONSUMER APPROACH

Suppose that you are moving to a new community, or that your pediatrician retires or moves, or that for some other reason you are in the position of having to choose a new doctor for your children. How would you go about it?

Last year, both Anita Wagner and Debbie Hauserman, who each have a child with Down syndrome and live in the Denver area, were in that position because their pediatrician moved away. PEAK talked with them about their experience. Each of them “did their homework” by asking their doctor for referrals before he left and by seeking additional recommendations from other doctors, hospital personnel, and other parents. Then each went one step further and interviewed doctors before making a choice.

#### Questions and Answers

How can parents interview doctors? Mrs. Wagner recommends that you prepare by thinking about your own and your children's needs in both medical and emotional terms. Then make an interview appointment and explain your situation and needs in a straightforward way. Wagner was looking for someone who would see her child as an individual and a child first, who would be supportive to the needs of the whole family and see parents' concerns and questions as valid. In the interview she not only listened to verbal answers to her questions, but also watched the way that the doctor interacted with her son. She was looking for her own “gut level reaction”. Her approach paid off—she found a pediatrician who was responsive, caring and trusting.

Mrs. Hauserman found that the attitude of the office or the physician about scheduling an interview was sometimes negative—indicating to her that it was not the kind of practice she would want for her children. One doctor only attempted to impress her with his qualifications, but didn't ever talk to her son.

In interviews, Mrs. Hauserman asked only a few prepared questions. Since she knew that each doctor had patients with Down syndrome, she wanted to know if they had treated older as well as younger patients. She asked about their philosophy of practicing medicine, of different aspects of treatment for children with Down syndrome. Mrs. Hauserman had read a great deal on Down syndrome and had her own opinion on treatment, and was looking for a physician whose philosophy matched hers.

What Mrs. Hauserman was really looking for was to see how each doctor responded to her son. An effective questions was “How do you feel about people with Down syndrome?” or

some other open-ended question that would allow the doctor to do most of the talking, revealing his or her own personality or style of interaction.

The Hausermans chose a physician who spent time in the interview playing with their son. He asked questions not only about the boy but about the rest of the family as well. He had treated many children with Down syndrome and was open to questions about himself and his own philosophy of medicine.

### A Physician's Point of View

Looking at the issue from the other side, PEAK spoke with Dr. James Piper, a Grand Junction pediatrician whose patients include a number of children with disabilities. Being interviewed by a parent is nothing new for him—in his practice interviews are routinely offered at no cost to pregnant women to help them in choosing a pediatrician. Neither the woman nor the physician is under any obligation to accept the other as doctor or client.

For parents who are searching for a pediatrician, Dr. Piper has a number of suggestions. If you are new to an area, the most important people for you to find are families similar to yours—families who have a child with a disability and who also have a personality match. They will be able to connect you to doctors, pharmacies and all kinds of services. Also check with schools, therapists and hospitals for referrals.

Dr. Piper agrees with Wagner and Hauserman that the most important thing to look for is whether the doctor views your child as a person, no matter what his or her level of functioning.

When asked whether parents should search out a pediatrician who is an expert on their child's disability, Dr. Piper replied that it is essential that someone in the child's care system be an expert. Because it is so difficult to keep current, there are some things that a pediatrician must refer out to another specialist. He may refer a patient with a disability to another specialist. He may require a patient with a disability to have routine check ups with other specialists such as a pulmonologist or a urologist. Dr. Piper believes his responsibility as the primary care provider is to be willing to find the kind of care that each patient needs. Most care decisions will be made by or with the family by evaluating his recommendation in the context of the family structure, stability of the family, distances involved in treatment and family economics.

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