

“THE HEALTH CARE CHOICES DOCTORS MAKE.....”

Unwell doctors are keen to avoid appearing inadequate or wasting a treating-doctor's time and admit that judging the best time to seek independent medical advice is difficult. They may also be unable to find a doctor with the time or willingness to treat them and opt for the convenient and private option of self-treat and self-referral.

Doctors can choose to purchase and self-medicate with 'over-the-counter' therapies as our patients do, but access to more potent prescription medication grants doctors a much greater choice of therapies. We know that a significant number of SA doctors (50%) chooses to self-treat both acute and chronic illness with prescription-strength medication.

At first glance, doctors also appear to have a wider choice and easier access to medical care than their patients by virtue of our networks within the profession, the opportunity to seek out the 'corridor' advice of colleagues, or to conveniently self- investigate whenever it is required.

Doctors who self-refer can find that the use of their own professional referral networks for this purpose can be unwelcome and does not necessarily guarantee access to a doctor who is well-trained in treating doctor-patients. Sub-optimal treatment outcomes may follow.

There is good evidence of “blended” use of medical services by doctors who practise selective use of their regular doctor for non-psychiatric conditions whilst engaging in limited and covert forms of self-treatment and referral. Rural, solo and IMG doctors are particularly prone to blended care by virtue of their remoteness or lack of access to Medicare.

But the group with the highest rate of self-treatment is self-employed doctors in private practice (58%).

Kay (2009) recently described how doctors seeking formal medical care want it to be patient-centric and empathetic..... We just want what our patients are getting!

Evidence suggests that doctors regard better access to a treating doctor as important for their health and there is sufficient local research to conclude that, in terms of improving the health of the profession, doctors broadly value the following:

1. A dedicated health program for the profession
2. Full independence from Government and Medical Board
3. Check-ups
4. empathetic and patient-centric consultations
5. access to a choice of doctors
6. professionalism and confidentiality.
7. Clear ways to assist a struggling colleague.

The latter is important and the new Doctors Health SA program will offer a new point of contact for doctors concerned about a colleague. This will be discussed in the next and final article.