

Author offers guide for navigating health-care system



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If you have ever gone to a doctor's office or a hospital, and that includes just about everybody, you know that it can be an intimidating, frustrating and frightening experience. The reasons for that are numerous, including everything from lack of good communication with the doctor to finding out your insurance plan doesn't cover the test or treatment you need.

Bethlehem resident and author Ruthann Russo, Ph.D., has written a book to help consumers wade through the waters of the health-care industry. Russo has used her experience as a consumer and advisor to health-care organizations to compile the book "7 Steps to Your Best Possible Healthcare: The Essential Guide for Crafting Your Personal Healthcare Plan."

The seven steps include creating your vision, owning your story, building relationships, and assessing quality. The chapters revolving around those steps cover a list of subjects such as paying for your health care, finding a new doctor, getting the most out of your doctor visits, and understanding the structure and lingo of the medical arena. The book includes a discussion of Web sites that rate doctors and hospitals and provide information on their credentials.

Readers of this book will find it a comprehensive tool for maneuvering through and understanding the health-care system. It is a must-read as it brings together into one volume the information needed for consumers to get the medical attention they deserve. With some self-assessment exercises, the book helps the reader understand what he/she values in a doctor and then how to find one who mirrors those values. Reading the book only reinforces how much work and responsibility falls on each health-care consumer to get the care he or she needs. This is a book the reader will want and need to reference often.

BOOK REVIEW

Health-care team leaders

"The ultimate goal of this book is to increase your confidence in dealing with the health-care system by educating you about the system in seven specific steps: create your own vision, own your story, build your relationships, assess quality, understand the people, know the places, and learn the language," says the introduction.

The first exercise in the book helps the reader assess what he/she values in a health-care provider. Throughout the book Russo refers the reader back to these core values and how they play a role in finding and assessing any future providers. Chapter one urges each person to create his own health values, vision and mission statements (VVMS).

Chapter two discusses the need for a medical mentor, usually a friend or relative, who during a health crisis helps you analyze treatment options, communicate with your health-care providers, and organize treatment schedules. The medical mentor and your primary care physician (PCP) will help determine the effectiveness of your health care and coordinate efforts.

One of the most valuable points in the book is the information on how to find a PCP. Page 65 includes sources for finding a PCP, such as Internet-based rating services and various associations and agencies. Surrounding pages help you determine what questions to ask a prospective doctor and staff, and what to look for in their office.

Costs and your rights

With the cost of health care being what it is, page 99 offers this advice: "The fact that hospitals charge uninsured patients the rate on their charge master is not malicious. Federal law actually requires the hospital to charge you its published fee — unless you, the patient, initiate negotiations to reduce the fee. You can and should use this information to negotiate the price for your health-care services."

Quality assessment

The author reveals the Web sites consumers can go to when assessing a health-care provider's quality. Such organizations as the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO) give accreditation to organizations they feel are worthy. Russo says, "In general, avoid treatment from providers unless JCAHO has accredited them."

Other rating agencies such as www.healthgrades.com are valuable tools listed in this chapter.

Today's consumer is bombarded with ads from pharmaceutical companies selling their drugs. Russo says: "It is important to view ads with a critical eye, keeping in mind your personal VVMS. If you follow your core values and use trusted physicians who practice ethically, information overload is likely to be more manageable."

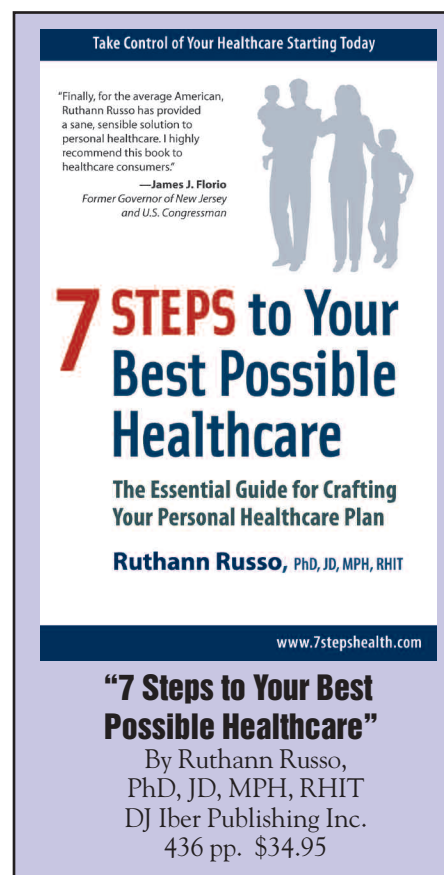
The book also goes on to explain what education and training doctors and other medical personnel receive, and how knowing that information may help patients understand how to relate to their providers more successfully.

Today, many people are interested in complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) and this book delves into those areas as well. Chapter 12 helps the reader look at whether CAM is right for him/her. Through the pages of this chapter, Russo explains what this type of medicine involves, who is qualified to provide it, and additional reading for further research.

The remaining chapters round out the reader's tour of the health-care industry with information on the differences between a teaching and non-teaching hospital, medical terms, and medical codes that every health-care consumer needs to know.

This book is scheduled to be in retail outlets in February.

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Russo goes on to enumerate the free and reduced-cost resources that are available, and where you can go to get more information. She also shares the ways a consumer can purchase affordable health insurance on his/her own.

In chapter six on knowing your rights, the author stresses the need for reviewing and correcting any errors in your medical file. As the owner of your medical information, you have this right along with the right to obtain copies of your records and films.

You also have the right to obtain a second or even a third, fourth and fifth opinion on your health care. Some reasons to consider a second opinion are listed on page 197. These include:

- Your doctor recommends a major surgery with which you feel uncomfortable or uncertain;
- You're unsure about the doctor's diagnosis or approach; or
- You are having trouble talking with your current doctor.