

2019

Wellness Through Answers News v.34:no.1 January-February 2019

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Recommended Citation

Urciuoli, Wendy, "Wellness Through Answers News v.34:no.1 January-February 2019" (2019). *Articles - Patient Care*. 116.
https://opencommons.uconn.edu/pcare_articles/116



Wellness through Answers News

January/February 2019

*Linking Connecticut Patients, Families, and Residents to
Reliable Health Information*

New Name

The name "HealthNet" is no longer used by our library's consumer health information service. Our service is now called "Wellness through Answers." To be consistent, we have renamed our newsletter, too. Although our name has changed, our focus remains the same: linking you to reliable health information.

How Does Your Doctor Make Referrals?

You need to see a specialist, have an MRI, or go for blood work. Your primary care doctor makes a referral. **How do they decide** where to send you? If your doctor works for a hospital-owned medical practice, they may be pressured to refer you to a specialist or facility that are in that hospital's network. In some cases, hospitals have **terminated the contracts** of doctors who did not comply.

Although hospitals argue keeping referrals in their network ensures continuity of patient care, the **real reason** is financial. Hospitals earn more money when patients are referred to doctors or facilities in the hospital's network.

Losing Their License Does Not Keep Doctors from Practicing Medicine

Doctors may lose their license if they have botched surgeries, sexually assaulted patients, or engaged in insurance fraud. Did you know that doctors disciplined in one state can easily move to another state and continue to practice medicine? An investigative reporter for the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* examined **how this happens**.

What can consumers do to protect themselves from dangerous doctors? They can use these resources to check out their doctors.

- Start with the medical board in your state. Most boards have websites where the records of doctors can be checked. In Connecticut, recent disciplinary actions taken against doctors or physician assistants are reported on the **Department of Public Health's** (DPH) website. Older actions are reported in the DPH's "**Regulatory-Action Reports**." Connecticut doctor licenses can be verified online using the **eLicense** website.
- If you know your doctor has practiced in another state, or holds a license in another state, check the website of that state's medical board as well.
- Finally, you can search the Federation of State Medical Boards' clearinghouse of **state medical board actions**.

Recovery High Schools for Teens Struggling with Addiction

Teens struggling with addiction need a school environment that cares about their mental health and helps them stay sober. **Recovery high schools** offer an alternative to traditional secondary schools for students fighting addiction. Recovery schools have been successful, in part, because students are among sober peers and they have teachers and counselors who support their sobriety. Currently there are 40 recovery schools in the U.S. You can locate a recovery school through the **Association of Recovery Schools** website.

State Protections Against Balanced Billing

Connecticut is **one of only six states** that have comprehensive consumer protections against surprise medical bills. Surprise medical bills, also known as balance bills, occur when a provider bills an insurance company far more than what the insurer will pay. Consumers are expected to pay the balance of that bill. Surprise bills also arise in situations where the consumer unknowingly receives services from uncovered out-of-network providers. In emergency care situations, consumers do not have control over whether the hospital assigns an out-of-network provider assist in your care. Learn more about protections for Connecticut consumers in a **new report** from the nonprofit Commonwealth Fund.

Taking Many Medications at the Same Time Can Be Risky for Older Adults

It is not uncommon for older adults to be taking several medications at the same time. Taking five or more medications simultaneously is called "polypharmacy." **A new study** in the *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* found an association between polypharmacy and cognitive impairment. Older adults taking at least five medications were almost twice as likely to develop memory and thinking problems (mild cognitive impairment) and more than twice as likely to develop dementia (severe cognitive impairment) than older adults on fewer than five medications. Investigators found education, exercise, social activities, tea, and sleep could reduce the likelihood of cognitive impairment. A summary of the study can be found on Peter Simons' blog, *madinamerica*.

Schedule an Annual Medication Review

Make a New Year's resolution to **review your medications**. Why? You might be popping too many pills. Changing your lifestyle, like getting more exercise and losing weight, may change your need to be on medications. Age-related changes may affect how our bodies process medications. For older adults, some medications **should be avoided** because their effects are more pronounced and last longer. Also, some medications added during transitions from hospitals to rehabilitation facilities, or when coming home after surgery, are no longer necessary. Ask your pharmacist or primary care doctor about the medications you are taking. Don't, however, stop taking any medications without first talking with your doctor.

Seasonal Affective Disorder

Does winter leave you feeling blue, irritable, or worn out? If so, you might be suffering from Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). SAD is a form of depression that can be triggered by the reduced light of winter. Surprisingly SAD also occurs in the summer. Summer SAD is believed to be caused by longer days and increased humidity. The [HelpGuide](#) website offers an online [self-help guide](#) for those suffering from SAD. The guide explains the causes of SAD, how it is diagnosed, and how it is treated. The guide also offers SAD sufferers detailed, realistic tips for living with this condition.

Cancer Prevention Tips

Cancer survivors are often encouraged to change their lifestyle to prevent the recurrence of cancer. Many patients find the prospect of improving their diet, exercising more, and learning to de-stress overwhelming. The [American Institute for Cancer Research](#) (AICR) has introduced a free program called [iTHRIVE](#) to help cancer survivors make these changes. To get started, patients must complete a ten-minute survey online. Patient answers are loaded into a proprietary formula that recommends individualized "action steps" in five key lifestyle areas: diet, movement, environment, rejuvenation, and spirit. According to patients who have used this tool, iTHRIVE recommends fun, bite-sized activities that patients can easily incorporate into their lives.

Shopping for a Surgical Procedure?

Wondering where to have your knee replacement surgery done? Consumers often have a choice of going to an ambulatory surgery center (i.e. a non-hospital facility) or a hospital. Medicare's [Procedure Price Lookup](#) tool lets consumers compare the national average cost to have a procedure done at an ambulatory surgery center with the cost for a hospital outpatient service.

Price should not be the only factor driving a consumer's decision. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services's (CMS) website also offers a [checklist](#) of questions to help consumers select the right facility. The CMS website also offers a tool that compares the [quality of area hospitals](#) and a tool to find [ambulatory surgery centers](#) by city, state, or zip code.

Is That Knee Replacement Necessary?

One in three knee replacement patients continue to experience chronic pain after surgery. **One in five** patients are dissatisfied with the results of their surgery. A study in *BMJ* found that knee replacement offered "minimal effects on quality of life," especially for patients with severe arthritis. According to experts interviewed by *Kaiser Health News (KHN)*, US doctors perform too many knee replacement surgeries. *KHN reports* that the benefits of knee replacement surgery have been oversold to patients, and many patients do not even meet criteria for knee replacement surgery.

More Health Information You Can Use:

- How to get a copy of your older adult's **medical records**
- **Robotic waiters** controlled by adults with disabilities
- Trying to remember something? **Draw a picture**
- **Ten questions** to ask if you are diagnosed with prostate cancer
- **Recycle** your fitness tracker
- **Wearable sensors** enhance yoga practice
- **Detectives** solve mystery disease cases
- **App** diagnoses melanoma
- **Sweat sensors** aren't just for athletes
- Easy **ten-step program** to change unhealthy habits

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