

RISE of the empowered patient

Once upon a time, healthcare lay almost solely in the hands of doctors. But now a brand new breed of smart, savvy and switched on consumers are set to change the way we look at both treatment and wellness

By Bonnie Cleaver



Sometimes, getting to the bottom of niggling symptoms can be like solving a mystery. As chief health 'detective', your doctor has to piece together the clues and conduct tests to crack the case. While most of the time things run smoothly, in some cases, the detective work is flawed, or a hard-to-solve condition gets shelved and it's up to the patient to keep searching for answers. For Melanie Augustin, 40, that search took 27 years. "My symptoms started when I was 10," she recalls. "I had chronic stomach aches, bloating and diarrhoea. I saw doctors and specialists, and the consensus was stress-induced irritable bowel syndrome. I was told to put up with it, which I did for years." But a few months after having her daughter, Melanie's health hit a new low. She was severely fatigued, her digestion worsened and she frequently had a prickling sensation in her face. Unable to shake the hunch that her symptoms were due to coeliac disease—despite the fact multiple tests couldn't confirm it—she saw a gastroenterologist who finally confirmed that she was, in fact, a coeliac. "What I learnt from it all was that you know your body better than anyone else," she says. "If you don't feel right, trust your instincts and keep investigating until you get an answer."



Unravelling the trend

It doesn't seem like that long ago when the doctor-patient relationship was less of a partnership and more of a parent-child dynamic. So, what changed? The advent of the internet, for starters. The web has made medical information more accessible than ever before, boosting health literacy and connecting people around the world with similar symptoms and conditions (which, at times, can be a double-edged sword). Then there's the explosion of chronic conditions, which has forced health awareness into the spotlight. "Chronic illnesses are occurring with greater frequency in progressively younger populations, and these patients are of the generation who question more," says Dr Penny Caldicott, GP and *Prevention* adviser. "So for instance, when they're prescribed a medication and told they need to stay on it for life, they're much less likely to accept that's 'just the way it is', particularly if they experience side effects."

Add to that a general dissatisfaction with the mainstream healthcare system, where rushed consultations with time-pressured, overworked GPs is the norm. "The truth is, there's very little you can figure out in a 10-minute consultation," says Dr Caldicott. "Sure, you can tell if someone's got an ear infection, but what you might not get is that they've had a lot of ear infections over a long period of time, their immunity is suffering and they have other issues. The 10-minute consult is okay for acute (short-term) illnesses, but it's not dealing with the underlying reason why someone is sick, or allowing the doctor to look at the whole person or to really individualise treatment."

It's clear there's a growing demand for good healthcare in Australia. But the real question is: how can you improve your chances of getting it in the face of an increasingly overloaded medical system? Simple. By becoming an empowered patient you can squeeze every last drop of value out of consultations with your doctor. You'll also master vital skills, like confidently seeking out a second opinion. Ready to 'power up'? Read on. ▶

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The percentage of Australian GPs who classify themselves as traditional family doctors. The majority of patients now visit time-stretched doctors who work out of large medical centres.

Patients: new and improved

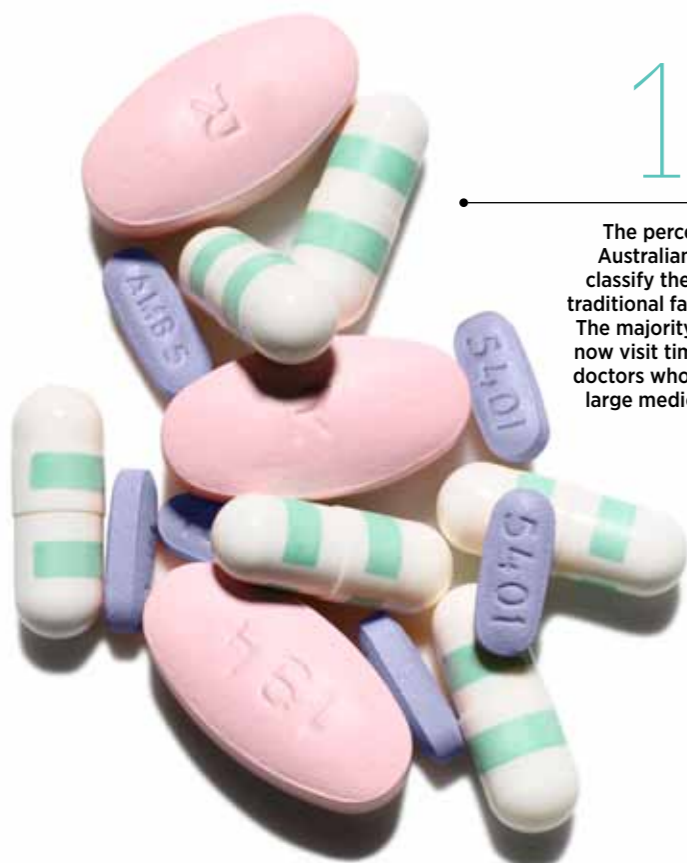
Melanie is part of a new breed of proactive patients who are changing healthcare as we know it. Compared to the passive patient of the past, who put the doctor on a pedestal and obediently followed orders, the modern patient is savvy, health-literate and not afraid to speak up, ask questions and, where necessary, challenge the doctor or even seek out another medical opinion. In a word, the modern patient is increasingly being described as empowered. "The 'empowered patient' is changing the preposition—rather than experiencing medicine as something that is done 'to' us or 'for' us, it becomes something that is done 'with' us," explains Trisha Torrey, patient advocate and author of *You Bet Your Life! The 10 Mistakes Every Patient Makes (How to Fix Them to Get the Health Care You Deserve)* (Langdon

Street Press). "This kind of patient advocates for themselves, takes responsibility and understands that they're the ones who should be in the driver's seat, making their own healthcare decisions."

Of course, even the most well-informed, confident patient still needs the expertise and guidance of health professionals. "It's not about replacing medical providers' roles in any way; instead, it's about partnering with them," explains Martine Ehrenclou, patient advocate and author of *The Take-Charge Patient: How You Can Get The Best Medical Care* (Lemon Grove Press). "Doctors are still the experts—they have the training, degrees and experience that the patient doesn't have, but the patient is also an expert: on herself, her symptoms, preferences, beliefs, culture, tolerance to risk such as surgery, and the sorts of treatments she is comfortable with." Think of it as a 50:50 partnership, where you have to meet health professionals halfway when it comes to safeguarding and promoting your wellbeing.

TIP: For the best results, be prepared to collaborate. "It's not about replacing doctors," says Ehrenclou. "They're still the experts, but the patient is also an expert—on herself."

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7 steps to being a savvy patient

#1 First, shift your attitude

You wouldn't dream of marching into a dealer and buying the first car you see. Yet when it comes to important health decisions, many of us take a less-than-thorough approach. "We need to make the shift from being a receiver of care to being the person in charge—the leader and decision-maker," urges Torrey. This means viewing healthcare providers as resources—people who can help you understand what your options are, with the decision-making ultimately up to you.

#2 Maximise your GP consults

"Don't worry that your doctor is too busy—as a GP, my attitude is that as soon as someone is sitting in front of me, my time is their time," assures Dr Jill Thistlethwaite, professor of medical education at the University of Queensland. It also helps to prepare for your consult. Before you go, write down a list of questions, plus your top three medical concerns—both to avoid overwhelming your doctor and to ensure you don't walk away realising you forgot to flag something important. And if you're confused about something, speak up! "Say 'I'm not sure I understand; is there some way you could explain it to me?'" suggests Dr Caldicott.

#3 Do thorough, credible research

Sure, 'Doctor Google' is always on call, but his medical expertise can be patchy and, at times, he's a downright fearmonger. The trick to tapping the 'modern oracle'? Home in on credible information. "Websites run by medical academies, disease organisations or governments—ones that end in .edu, .org or .gov—tend to supply credible information," says Ehrenclou. Another tip? Follow the money. "Figure out who is looking to benefit and in what way, to ensure there's no conflict of interest—such as ads for cholesterol meds on a website about heart conditions," advises Torrey.

#4 Get an accurate diagnosis

According to some estimates, as many as one in 10 doctors' diagnoses are incorrect. "To boost your likelihood of an accurate diagnosis, ask your doctor, 'What else could it be?'" advises Torrey. "If you know what possibilities have been dismissed, you can research them yourself and ask your doctor what made them rule it out, so nothing accidentally slips through the cracks."



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The percentage of people who use the internet to self-diagnose their health problems.

TIP:

Treat medical consults like you would business appointments. We're not talking about dusting off your '80s power suit, but being prepared with a list of medications and copies of any recent test results—it will deliver instant credibility.



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#5 Seek a second opinion

It's a touchy issue: your doctor has delivered a diagnosis or treatment plan that doesn't sit right with you. How do you know when a second opinion is merited—and how do you request a referral without causing offence? As a rule of thumb, if you're told you have a serious illness (particularly if it's been diagnosed based on tests that don't have clear or conclusive results), or if you're recommended a treatment that is invasive or lifelong, it's wise to get a second opinion—and if they clash, a third opinion as a 'tie breaker'. And yes, there are diplomatic ways of asking your doctor for a referral. "Try saying, 'I want to gain more information about my diagnosis and possible treatment plans—can you refer me to a specialist?'" suggests Ehrenclou. Another handy phrase? "I'll try this treatment plan for a couple of weeks but, if I'm not better then, could I have a referral?" Smoother than a polmie in election season.

#6 Don't be afraid to question

Fact: if you see a surgeon for their take on the best treatment for say, chronic back pain, they're statistically more likely to recommend surgery than a health professional from another field, such as a physiotherapist, chiropractor or osteopath. "I always advise people to trust, but verify," says Torrey. "You don't have to make any decisions immediately. Your doctor might recommend something, then you can go home and determine whether it's really what you want to do." And don't be afraid to take a collaborative approach to exploring treatment options. Broach the subject with your doctor by saying, "I've heard of X treatment. Is this treatment appropriate for me?" The more questions you ask, the more you'll learn.

#7 Own your health information

One of the best ways to stay in the driver's seat of your own wellbeing? Create a personal health file and take it to your consults. Include a list of the medications and supplements you're taking, notes on your health history plus your family medical history and, if you're currently seeking a diagnosis, a medical journal tracking your symptoms. Also, get in the habit of requesting—and reviewing—copies of any test results and procedure reports. "If you correct any errors now, you can avoid the wrong information coming back to bite you down the track," notes Torrey. Too busy to collate your medical info? Stick with one practice so your records are localised. Just one easy strategy that will help you feel stronger and live longer in this brave new world of collaborative healthcare. 

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