

Hospitalists: Some of the Most Important Physicians You've Never Heard Of

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What Does *Hospitalist* Mean?

If you've ever been admitted to a hospital, you probably understand the confusion and frustration of dealing with a new doctor every few hours. It's hard to keep track of who you've met and which doctor prescribed which medications, not to mention how on earth you'll be able to relay this information to your primary care doctor.

The good news is that the answer to these problems has been at work in some hospitals for over a decade. The trouble now is simply getting the word out...literally. If you're like a lot of people outside the medical community, you've never heard the term *hospitalist*. It's a fairly recent word, coined only in 1996, but the actual position appeared much earlier in health care. A hospitalist is a physician who spends all (or most) of his or her time tending to patients in a hospital.

Before the creation of the title, some internal medicine physicians saw the need for physicians based out of a hospital setting and began practicing primarily in hospitals. Soon, other physicians began requesting these hospital-based doctors to oversee the care of patients admitted to the hospital. The benefits of utilizing an on-site physician materialized, and employing hospitalists is standard practice in many hospitals today.

Some hospitalists maintain a private practice outside of the hospital while many work solely as hospitalists. All hospitalists are board-certified physicians. They do not work in sub-specialties, such as cardiology or pulmonology. Because of the broad range of illnesses they treat, it is a natural transition for many internal medicine physicians to begin working as hospitalists. As in many doctor offices, nurse practitioners assist some hospitalists in treating patients.

What Does a Hospitalist Mean *to Me*?

So why might you be concerned with understanding the role of a hospitalist? Because you may find yourself being treated by one at a number of local hospitals. Riverside Regional Medical Center, Walter Reed Hospital, Riverside Tappahannock Hospital and Riverside Shore Memorial Hospital all boast hospitalists on staff. If a hospitalist program is established, a hospitalist will see any patient admitted to the hospital. After your initial evaluation, a hospitalist will consult any appropriate specialists, such as surgeons, about your case.

Continuity of care holds high priority for many hospitalists; the same hospitalist will treat you for most, if not all, of your stay in the hospital. That's right—no more new faces every few hours. Getting to know the person taking care of you eases some of the many worries involved in being admitted to the hospital.

Your hospitalist will not only take control of your care during your hospital stay, he or she will remain in constant communication with your primary care physician regarding your treatment. Hospitalists are not in competition with your outside physicians; they are an invaluable part of

your entire medical team. Your physician is always welcome to oversee your care during a hospital stay. However, many physicians appreciate the opportunity to entrust their patients' care to a competent, experienced on-site physician. You can feel secure knowing a hospitalist is available on location twenty-fours a day.

One of the most vital roles of your hospitalist is managing your discharge from the hospital. Having just one physician responsible for this process ensures all the important information is transmitted to all the right people. Your hospitalist explains your discharge report directly to your primary care physician: what procedures and treatment you experienced during your hospital stay; any changes made to your initial health care routine, especially changes in medication; and what follow-up care you require, such as follow-up tests or continued monitoring. This relieves you of the burden of trying to remember every new pill you were prescribed and every procedure you went through. Of course you'll want to keep your own record of your care, but your hospitalist will know exactly what information your primary care physician needs for the quickest and healthiest recovery.

Even after you've left the hospital, you may still have questions about your stay. Nurses work with some hospitalist programs to answer your calls after you've been discharged. They can answer your questions or help direct you to the appropriate physician.

More and more facilities across the nation are recognizing the benefits of hospitalist programs. Physicians dedicated specifically to caring for patients in the hospital provide peace of mind during a hectic, often scary time. Ask for a hospitalist program during your next stay in the hospital. The name may sound funny, but you can be sure your hospitalist is just as serious about your health as you are.