



I know you didn't follow up three years ago!

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About three years ago, I developed a medical condition that required a consultation with a specialist. I did some research online and chose a doctor in my city. Upon visiting, I noticed that the private clinic was very busy. The receptionist took my address, phone number, and age as a part of the registration process. After about one hour of waiting, I was able to meet the doctor. He spoke well, came up with a provisional diagnosis, prescribed medicines and made a recommendation for a blood and a urine test.

The next day I handed in the laboratory reports and was told to follow up with the doctor after a certain interval of time. I took all my medicines religiously and recovered completely in weeks.

Three years later I developed a different medical condition that fell in the domain of the same physician's expertise. Having been impressed with his earlier line of treatment, I visited him again. The same cycle of registration was repeated. When I met the doctor, I greeted him with a 'Good morning' to which there was no response. After the consultation, he wrote the provisional diagnosis and some prescription just like he had done the last time. However, this time,

he also wrote on the top of the page: '*Patient irregular with follow-up.*'

This was the first time I had heard of something like this being written on a medical record. The remark felt a bit similar to a teacher writing on your calendar: '*Your ward is irregular in class.*' It felt like disapproval of my inability to meet standards that were expected of me. I thought of how this record would be maintained and noticed on every subsequent visit. Why was it there? Was it there by mistake? Was there a way to erase or change this remark? I was unsure at the time.

I discussed these questions with a few friends who had also consulted the same doctor. Their best guess was that on my first visit, my name and phone number had been registered in his database. And now on my visit three years later - although for a different condition - he had been able to track the fact that I had not followed up with him as advised. After some searching through my files, I finally found the records of my consultation three years ago and tallied it with the recent one. Both had identical registration numbers. Our guess had been right!

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After my first visit three years ago, since I had completely recovered, I had thought that the purpose of the consultation had been met. I'd had a favorable outcome of the treatment and I had moved on. Like many other people I know of, I had thought that the primary purpose of visiting the doctor was to get rid of the ailment, and once that was achieved, both my and the doctor's job was completed. I felt that if a follow-up had been unequivocally necessary - even if the symptoms cleared up and the condition was completely cured (as happened with me, to my belief) - the doctor would have emphasized it in the record. The doctor could have recorded the health-related consequences should the patient miss a follow-up. Doing that might help patients like myself better understand our condition and take follow up more seriously.

I subsequently learned that writing such remarks is a common practice among medical practitioners. On the one hand, this may be a doctor's genuine attempt to keep a record of the patient's compliance with treatment. It would allow the doctor to make a fair assessment of the possible reasons for the treatment not working or assessing the effectiveness of the therapeutic approach. Record keeping can also help in case of legal liabilities especially when failure to follow up can lead to adverse outcomes.

On the other, it could appear like a slotting of patients as per their obedience level and keeping a record of it - perhaps forever - without their consent. Shouldn't the patient be told that one of the purposes of taking their phone numbers was so that it could be used as an identifier of their compliance? I also wondered if any physician would want to use such a record to discourage visits from patients who do not follow up, perhaps seeing them as a source of lost revenue. I sincerely hoped not.

This time around, I decided to follow up as and when advised, and to also check with

the doctor on the remark he had made on my record. At the end of the consultation, I pointed to the remark and gently asked why he'd written it. He responded that it was the truth - I hadn't come back the last time. He then immediately called for the next patient and I had no chance to ask any further questions. Had I had the chance, I would have wanted to know the relevance of making this remark on my record three years after the event. Did he believe that my health condition this time was in any way impacted by not following up the last time? To my mind, it was entirely unrelated, but was I wrong? And would this remark be on my record forever regardless of how dutifully I followed up henceforth? I would never know, I suppose.

I feel that a notation stating '*irregular with follow-up*' should be accompanied by the reasons for not following up, something the physician had not asked me: patient changing the physician for any reason; not having the financial resources to pay the follow-up fee; or (mistakenly or otherwise) patient not considering follow up as essential. Wouldn't getting a sense of these reasons help physicians better organize their clinical practice and prevent the health risks that could ensue through erratic follow-ups? My physician could have used the registered phone number to send out a reminder to me, like many other physicians do, I hear. A telephonic follow up might even be considered (for example, in a case like mine) where a clinical visit may not be essential. This would also save the patient's time and money.

In totality, this experience opened my eyes to something that is routine in clinical practice but which provoked me to ponder over some of its implications. Now, going forward, I have made a practice of always asking whether a follow-up is essential. Will an in-person follow up be necessary or will a telephonic one suffice? This experience made me a little more aware of my duties when it comes to

following up, and also that I need to take an active part in the interactions with my doctor. It reaffirmed that a healthy doctor-patient relationship is a two-way street where

responsibility lies with both parties. As a general rule, however, wherever possible, I avoid doctors with whom I find there is a limited scope of asking questions.

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