

Bring a Friend to the Doctor

by Marsha Saxton

Following the advice I'd read in *Ms. Magazine*, I asked a friend to accompany me to an appointment to see an orthopedic specialist. The article suggested your friend could take notes and help remind you to ask all your questions. Most importantly, your friend could give you moral support if anything difficult or unforeseen came up during the visit. The friend I asked was an experienced disability advocate. She was also a wheelchair user like I am.

I had to wait several weeks for the appointment at a very busy hospital in Boston, Massachusetts. On the afternoon of the appointment, my friend and I sat a long time in the crowded waiting room. Finally the nurse called my name. I introduced my friend, saying I'd asked her to come along for support. The nurse just shrugged and said, "Fine, but it might be tight in the small exam room." We maneuvered into the room and waited for the doctor to come.

Eventually he burst in, immediately looking annoyed, almost threatened.

"Who is the patient?" he demanded to know.

"I am," I said. No sooner had I started to introduce myself and my friend, when he interrupted me and said, "I can't see two patients at once!"

Then he turned to my friend and said, "You'll have to leave the room!"

He backed away and opened the door for her to leave. I tried to explain that she was here as my support person, not as a patient. Even more insistently, he repeated his demand that she leave.

I felt my face get hot. "I can't believe you are treating us like this. We're both leaving." When we wheeled out of the room, we momentarily blocked his exit, and he became stuck beside the door, with a shocked look in his face.

"Nobody should see that doctor alone!" I thought.

When I got home, I was still shaking. I called my HMO and told them what had happened and that I wanted them to refuse to pay for the appointment. I hadn't been seen and the doctor had been completely unprofessional and rude. My friend helped me write a letter to the director of the hospital, describing the incident. A few weeks later I got a phone call from the director. He apologized and said the doctor had been reprimanded for his rudeness, and there would be no charge for the appointment. He also arranged to fit me in to see another orthopedic specialist within a week; a doctor who was to be respectful to both me and my support person.

I continue to bring a support person with me to every appointment, and I highly recommend it to everyone.