

5 Tips for Getting the Best Care You Can

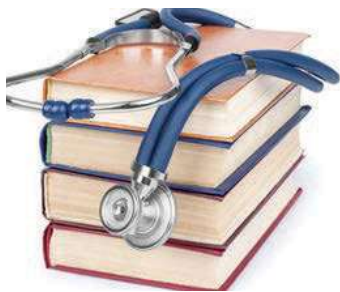
By Brian Carmichael

I've spent more than half my life incarcerated, everywhere from the California Youth Authority to Rikers Island, San Quentin to Sing Sing, so I've obviously been a failure as a criminal. But over the years I have learned to deal with the Medical Department to get the best care I can get, and am here, alive and healthy, after living with HIV for more than 20 years, doing hepatitis C (hep C) treatment successfully, and even surviving a couple of surgeries. It's fair to say I've had lots of interactions with doctors and nurses in corrections.

Here are some of the techniques and tactics I've developed over the years that I recommend to everyone, for the best relationship with your providers, and the best results in your care, treatment, and recovery.

1. Educate yourself.

Learn about your medical condition, including the best available treatments and medications.



Reach out to knowledgeable peers and local organizations. This issue of *Turn It Up!* is full of great resources that you can write to. Get friends and family to research and send you relevant information from reputable Internet sites.

Ask questions of your providers, or even write to the Pharmacy at your facility requesting information about your medication. This is especially important if you're changing medications or starting a new one, because important, even vital information might be overlooked, or just not fully explained to you.

Cases in point: When my HIV meds were changed from Atripla to Genvoya, both the HIV doc and the Pharmacy neglected to inform me that unlike Atripla, which is supposed to be taken on an empty stomach, Genvoya is most effective when taken with food! I only dis-

covered this after my best friend outside researched Genvoya online at *TheBody.com* website.

Similarly, a rheumatologist once prescribed me a medication for arthritis, then immediately discontinued it, after my research showed it was in a class of meds called "immuno-suppressants"—not recommended for people with HIV or "chronic immune system issues," like me.

The best way to ensure you're getting the best care available: Know your stuff and be your own advocate.



2. Keep a journal.

In a writing tablet, calendar, or some blank typing paper from the Law Library, create your own little medical file, keeping track of everything related to your health.

Thursday, 12-21-2017, Sick Call, Fever & Headache. Or

Tuesday, 12-26-2017, Lab results: 800 T-Cells, 213 Viral Load.

Entries don't have to be long and drawn out, but enough for you to keep track and provide accurate

information to your provider when making decisions about your treatment. And, if you ever need to file a grievance or lawsuit, you'll have accurate records, and know which documents to subpoena.

3. Be polite, respectful, and appreciative.

Just saying "Please" and "Thank You" goes a long way. Even if you're beefing with a doctor or nurse, avoid personal attacks and insults, as much as their attitudes or actions may lead you to feel disrespected.

Being incarcerated means you can't just go across town to another hospital, or see another doctor. When you need care and treatment, for better or worse, those same doctors and nurses are going to be in control of your care. Doctors and nurses are human, so they're not perfect. If they're going to shit on one guy, and maybe go a little extra on someone else, I would much rather be the guy they treat right. I'm not saying you have to be a kiss-ass, or just lay down and accept being mistreated. In fact, I'll stack my record of pointing out truly bad treatment next to any other incarcerated person's. But I've always been polite, respectful, and appreciative of time, effort, and energy my providers give me.

A perfect example is when

I was in the middle of my hep C treatment (I did the old ribavirin and interferon, a 14-month course). I was losing weight, my white and red blood cell counts were crashing, and I was in the clinic twice, maybe three times a week. I told my main provider (shout-out to Nurse Practitioner Jill Northrop, best doc ever!): “Hey, I’m sorry for being so high maintenance, taking up so much of your time ... but I really appreciate it.” I still remember her reply; she said: “I try to treat everyone



the same, but it is nice to be appreciated.” I don’t know if I got any special treatment for being respectful, but after so many complications and close calls during that hep C treatment, I absolutely credit Nurse Jill with saving my life.

If you are denied medication for a month, and you lose patience and call a nurse a “bitch,” the next hearing you go to, or any lawsuit you file, will start and end with them arguing you were disruptive, disrespectful, or the old classic, inciting others. When you file a grievance, or a lawsuit, your position will always be on stronger ground if you can say, “I have always treated the medical staff at this institution with courtesy and respect.”

4. Be organized when you go to Sick Call, and especially when going to doctor’s appointments.

I imagine all correctional facilities are similar, in that while you may go to Sick Call once or twice a month, you don’t see doctors or specialists more than two or three times a year, unless you’re in some

acute, serious crisis. So, when you go to medical appointments or Sick Call, have a list of your issues, prioritized. That way you won’t forget something and have to wait another three or four months until your next doctor’s appointment.

There’s no telling how much time you’ll have for your appointment, so make sure to discuss the most important issues first, like: “Doc, we haven’t done lab work in seven months; can you please order some blood work, check my CD4 count and viral load?” That should be way higher on your list than, say, asking for cough syrup, ya know? The doctor or nurse will recognize and appreciate that you are taking an interest in your own care and being respectful of whatever time they have to spend on you.



5. When it’s time to submit prescription renewals, always turn in the forms or requests five days in advance, before your meds run out.

That gives the Pharmacy plenty of time to fill your prescription, and if you don’t get your meds by the time your old ‘script runs out, you can ask a C/O to call. One of the first things the Pharmacy will say is, “Why did you wait ‘til the last minute to renew your meds?” And you can say, “Actually, I submitted my request five days ago, and it’s important I not miss any doses of this medication.” That way, you avoid an interruption in your meds and short-circuit attempts to blame you for their mistakes.

Doctors and nurses, like lawyers, may be good or bad, caring or indifferent. But they are all overworked, with scores—often hundreds—of people on their caseloads. Many of us in prison, if we had horrible experiences with lawyers, spend the first five or 10 years in prison going to the Law Library, doing research, learning about the law, and discover mistakes made



by inexperienced, incompetent, or just overworked and overwhelmed lawyers. We become experts in the law and appeals. We imagine a different verdict, or a lesser sentence, fight and pray for a new trial, all of us thinking: “If I knew then what I know now, those mistakes wouldn’t have happened, and I wouldn’t be sitting in this prison cell.”

Well, just like lawyers “practice” law, doctors “practice” medicine. But unlike a legal mistake that might result in losing years of your life in prison, avoidable mistakes in your medical care can cost you years off your life—or your life itself. You may not have time after that to educate yourself, sitting in the library doing research, discovering mistakes you and your doctor made.

Educate and advocate for yourself. Follow these tips that have worked for me over the years, and the chances of you receiving the medication, care, and treatment you need will be greatly increased. ■

Brian Carmichael was incarcerated at Elmira Correctional Facility in Elmira, NY, when he wrote this article; he was released on parole in February 2019.