

QUESTIONS & NEXT STEPS is the section of my MEDICAL NOTEBOOK that I use most, adding to it constantly, especially as my next clinical appointment approaches. You will find that keeping your medical concerns in one place is far better than scattered notes—or worse, noting nothing at all because you may not realize how much your observations inform your care.

There is no form or chart for this section of your MEDICAL NOTEBOOK

Simply insert a few 3-hole-punched pages behind the QUESTIONS & NEXT STEPS divider and begin recording questions, observations, and fears as they occur to you at home or during medical appointments. These notes become your personal agenda at your next check-up.

In a section below your list of questions/observations and your clinicians' answers, record *Next Steps* that emerge during or after appointments. Think carefully about each topic discussed or procedure: *Is there some action required for me or someone else?* You may be surprised at how many you notice. Give each of these follow-up/action items a deadline, whether for you or for your clinical team. Confirm these action items with your clinicians at the conclusion of each appointment so everyone is clear about their next steps, just as you would at a business meeting.

Why do we give more thought to a meeting about town septic allocation

...or corporate sales goals than we do for a meeting about our own lives and well-being? Your doctors are medical experts, but *you* are the expert on your body. Arrive at medical appointments as a prepared expert. Discussing your questions/observations and *Next Steps* will ensure that your concerns are not lost in the rush of myriad clinical details. Preparation also maximizes quality time with doctors. I often look back in my notes to see if I have already received an answer to a question. If so, it comes off the list and another topic gets attention. Furthermore, if a clinician calls me at home, my questions/observations are ready. Best of all? My dedication to QUESTIONS & NEXT STEPS means that by the time each check-up rolls around, I simply review my notes and go. Easy.

Back at home, review your meeting notes

No clinical visit is complete for me until, back in the quiet of my home, I review my notes, place action items on my calendar, and schedule follow-up appointments. I might also record new questions/observations and *Next Steps* that occur to me then, while my mind is focused. Once satisfied that I am on top of clinical outcomes, I close my notebook and go back to living my lucky life. This discipline—a separation of the two worlds I inhabit—has been a huge stress reliever during critical periods requiring frequent clinical check-ups and grueling tests. Gaining closure on each medical visit helps me to contain my worries and not be defined by illness.

Tips for you

- Below each question/observation, leave a space or two for your clinician's answer.
- When you or a clinician completes a *Next Step*, give it a big check or the date it was completed. It's a great feeling!

AN EXAMPLE FROM MY QUESTIONS & NEXT STEPS

The notes below are from one month after my heart transplant. Jack and I had just moved into an apartment behind Mass General; I needed tests and examinations almost every day. During this post-transplant period, paying close attention to my body was critical.

9/19/06 MGH w/Marc:

- 1) When does 1st order of drugs need reordering & how? *Next clinic appt. will train me.*
- 2) Rehab yet? *Scheduled 9/26, 10 am.*
- 3) Don't drink mineral water?! Bottled water or from a Maine well? *Well water contains unfiltered bacteria; bottled is safe bec. processed/filtered.*
- 4) Ate piece of cucumber. OK? *Too little to matter. No fresh fruits & veggies for 3 mos.**
- 5) Other people's pets? *No pets! Don't touch, use Purell.*
- 6) Flash in my eye sometimes? *Will go. (It did.)*
- 7) When can I resume osteopathy? *OK when you go home (November).*
- 8) Flu shot? When? *Early Dec. Cardiac Transplant Clinic at MGH this time.*
- 9) Tingling in feet and hands? *Observe for awhile.*

NS:

- 1) Nuke sponges daily. Buy a small microwave.
- 2) Biopsy next week. Clinic will call tomorrow to schedule. Monitor!
- 3) Exchange portable blood pressure machine; this one isn't working.

9/26 w/Marc: *I often begin creating the agenda for the next visit during or immediately after the most recent visit.*

- 1) Train me today in ordering more drugs? (see #1 above)
- 2) Test BP machine again in clinic. Calibrated?

*Note: At that time, raw fruit and vegetables were forbidden for recent heart transplant graduates. This rule may have changed. Discuss with your physician.

Your Next Steps!

- 1) Go out and buy a 1.5 inch, 3-ring binder for your MEDICAL NOTEBOOK.
- 2) Also buy colorful (for easy identification) notebook section dividers and label them as recommended on my website, deborahdawheffernan.com.
- 3) Insert 3 or so copies of the forms/charts for each section (provided on my website) and give them a try. Customize and improve my drafts to work for you!
- 4) Insert a few pages of 3-hole-punched, lined paper after the QUESTIONS & NEXT STEPS divider.
- 5) Enter the date of your next appointment and the name of the doctor you will be seeing. Below that line, begin jotting your questions/observations. YOU are now in charge.