UA Cardiologist Talks About a New Way to Help Patients Watch Out for Their Health

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Dr. Joseph S. Alpert has spent his career caring for patients and teaching students how to care for patients. He has served as editor-in-chief of The American Journal of Medicine. And he was selected as the Gifted Teacher of the Year by the American College of Cardiology.

Over the years, Alpert has seen many changes in medicine. But he also has seen changes in the doctor-patient relationship. Specifically, he has witnessed the amount of time that doctors spend with patients shrinking, which has led him to his newest endeavor.

Alpert, a cardiologist and professor of medicine at the University of Arizona Sarver Heart Center, is poised to teach the viewing public about their heart health through a new effort known as Doctorpedia.

Lo Que Pasa talked with Alpert about Doctorpedia and its pending launch, his role in the undertaking, and the skills and instinct needed for good communications with patients and, in this case, the public.

What is Doctorpedia, and how did you get involved with it?

The story goes back about three years. I was a visiting professor at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles. I gave a talk and a man approached me afterwards and said he thought the talk was fabulous. He asked if I would do a series of talks on video for a venture he was pursuing. His name is Jeremy Wosner, and he's an entrepreneur from London. Jeremy wants to put together a bunch of videos that answer the questions patients want to ask in the doctor's office but never get a chance to. The company is talking to Google, to Facebook, some of the cable networks, with the idea of plugging into a huge venue so the videos appear nationally and eventually internationally.

How do the videos fill a void for patients?

Doctorpedia is something that many patients need especially now when doctors have less and less time to spend with their patients. Many remember the doctor who made house calls and who was friendly with the family. All that's disappeared. Things have become a lot more technical, there are a lot of tests, a lot of imaging. So, it's not surprising medicine is overwhelming for a lot of patients. People might be reading about medicine on the web, but there's often conflicting opinions on which approach to take when it comes to treatment. As you know, doctors don't always agree.

So how do the videos address that?

What we try to do with Doctorpedia is give a balanced view to let people know that there are
often choices, and there are advantages and disadvantages to those choices. We talk about the tests your doctor might order, and why they might be ordering them. The videos are patient-oriented. We use everyday English without medical terms. Each one lasts about 20 minutes, about the amount of time that you would want to hear your doctor tell you about it. The goal is to eventually cover all diseases. I've done a number so far, and a number of my colleagues have done a few as well, like Stephen Klotz, Janet Campion, Merri Pendergrass and Eugene Trowers, as well as other physicians here and on the East Coast.

We also talk a little about heredity and lifestyle. If you work on your lifestyle, if you stay thin and you exercise regularly, and you eat right, there's a good chance you're going to outlive the previous generation. And of course, these days, medicine has a lot of ways to help you out with that.

What topics will the videos cover?

The videos will cover heart disease, obstetrics and gynecology, pediatrics and so on. The first one that will launch will be on diabetes. I'm a cardiologist internist, so I've done one video where I talk about the bad things that can happen to your cardiovascular system if you have diabetes, why these bad things happen, how can we control them, what kind of steps you can take to prevent them? and how, if you already have diabetes, you can lessen their impact.

People can turn to the web for all sorts of health and medical information. So why video?

Well, say you have diabetes. You can go to the American Diabetes Association website, and there are a few pages of reading; most folks aren't going to do that. That's because sometimes it's easier to understand with video. We also try to make the videos as folksy as possible. Some were filmed in my home, some were filmed in a doctor's office, some in a kitchen.

Almost every day you talk with patients about their health. How do you take care of you?

Well, like most cardiologists, I'm a big believer in exercise. Out in my garage I have a Schwinn Airdyne Bike, so I pedal for an hour in the morning and that's when I read my journals. Then when I'm done with journals, I'll read my novels.

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