

Smart Healthcare Choices

PART 1: THE BASICS OF MEDICAL IMAGING

As “consumer-directed health care” continues to grow, each of us as individuals is playing a larger role in choosing (and paying for) our healthcare services. Center for Diagnostic Imaging is committed to providing you with helpful information intended to assist you with choosing high-quality, cost-effective medical services.

One area of medicine that is frequently needed as part of accurately diagnosing an injury or illness – yet is not well understood – is medical imaging. Medical imaging has a number of pseudonyms, including “diagnostic imaging,” “radiology services,” and “outpatient imaging.” In short, it is a general term to describe a variety of exams that are ordered by your doctor to get a clear picture of what is happening inside your body, using pictures. These exams include MRI scans, CT or CAT scans, X-ray, Mammography, Ultrasound and more. The focus of this email is on Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI). Before we continue, here’s a little quiz.

1. **True or false:** Your doctor must decide for you where you go for a medical imaging exam.
2. **True or false:** All MRI scanners take the same quality pictures of the inside of your body.
3. **True or false:** Regardless of where you have a medical imaging procedure, the cost is the same to you.

Does it surprise you that the answer to all three of these questions is, “False?” You are not alone. Some related facts:

1. You have a choice.

Choosing your medical imaging provider is no different than choosing any medical specialist. For instance, if you needed heart surgery, would you seek out the best surgeon for your specific condition? Of course! Similarly, you should consider what’s most important to you in choosing a medical imaging provider as an accurate diagnosis is the first step toward an effective treatment. Look for basic information, such as: *Is it conveniently located? Can they get me in today or as soon as I’d like? Are they covered by my insurance plan?* But here are a few bigger considerations:

2. Not all medical imaging equipment is of equal quality – so be sure to ask before you “buy.”

If you are having an MRI, most physicians agree that the gold standard is what’s called a “high-field” MRI, also known as a 1.5T MRI. What this means is that this MRI’s strength, measured in “Tesla” (thus the T) is very strong, and able to take crisp, clear pictures of the inside of your body, quickly and comfortably. There are MRI scanners with less “T” than 1.5, many of which are called “open” scanners. These scanners are a good choice for patients with severe claustrophobia or who weigh more than 300 lbs., but should be considered after higher-strength MRIs, as they cannot deliver as clear of pictures. They also take longer.

Sometimes people assume that they need an “open” scanner due to being nervous about claustrophobia. In today’s shorter, faster “high-field” MRI scanners extremely few patients experience severe claustrophobia – and sedation (usually valium) is sometimes available through your physician’s prescription if you are particularly concerned with your comfort level. The goal is the clearest picture, as fast as possible!

3. There is a significant difference in imaging costs depending on where you go.

For example, it costs about 40-50% less to have an MRI at a freestanding outpatient imaging center* than at the hospital. This translates to a significant reduction in your out-of-pocket cost, too – and can be more convenient.

**A freestanding imaging center is one not located within a hospital or billing through a hospital tax-ID.*

Once your doctor writes a prescription for a medical imaging exam for you or a loved one, it is up to you to decide where to go for the services. We hope this information helps you in that process.

Next time in Smart Healthcare Choices: “What’s a radiologist? And why does it matter that I know?”

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PART 2: WHAT IS A RADIOLOGIST?

As “consumer-directed health care” continues to grow, each of us as individuals is playing a larger role in choosing (and paying for) our healthcare services. Center for Diagnostic Imaging is committed to providing you with helpful information intended to assist you with choosing high-quality, cost-effective medical services.

One area of medicine that is frequently needed as part of accurately diagnosing an injury or illness – yet is not well understood – is medical imaging. In Part One of our Smart Healthcare Choices series, we discussed the importance of medical imaging overall and to your health care specifically, and provided a few tips on choosing the best provider for you and your family. Today, we turn our attention to one of the most critical aspects of medical imaging: the radiologist.

1. **True or false:** A radiologist is not an M.D.
2. **True or false:** A radiologist is the person that assists you with your imaging procedure.
3. **True or false:** Regardless of where you have your medical imaging done, the radiologist’s level of experience is standardized.

Does it surprise you that the answer to all three of these questions is, “False?” You are not alone. Some related facts:

1. A Radiologist is not only a Medical Doctor, he or she is also a specially trained MD!

Following medical school and internships, a physician who wants to become a radiologist goes through another two years of specialized training.

As a physician responsible for interpreting complex sets of medical images from a variety of different scanners – MRIs, CTs, x-rays, ultrasounds, mammograms, etc. – a radiologist has to be exceptionally skilled. He or she is responsible for providing the physician who sent you for your procedure with a diagnosis – an answer to what’s wrong. This information gives your physician what he or she needs to recommend next steps and a treatment plan for you.

Sometimes radiologists are called “invisible doctors” because they rarely meet their patients directly. Rest assured, though, that they are playing a critical role in your health care.

2. The person that assists you with your imaging procedure is not a radiologist – he or she is a technologist, and he or she is also critical to your care.

There are several factors that go into a high-quality medical imaging procedure, and to the results being concise, accurate and quick.

Imagine medical imaging as a Formula One car race: the equipment (i.e., the MRI or CT scanner, the x-ray machine) is the race car. And the car is only as good as its driver and crew.

The driver is the radiologist. He or she uses the car to win – or in medical imaging’s case, to get the answers you and your doctor need. The crew includes the associates that help you and your physician with every aspect of your visit. Part of that crew are technologists, who guide you through your specific procedure. Technologists are trained on specific imaging equipment, on the computers that run the scanners, on the clinical protocols related to your exam, and on patient care overall.

3. There is a significant difference in radiologists depending on where you go.

It is true that all radiologists have a level of standardized education and experience due to medical school, residencies and internships. But that is where the standardization ends.

Some radiologists go on to become “sub-specialized.” Because radiologists are already “specialists,” being a “sub-specialist” means that a radiologist has gone on to pursue a medical imaging fellowship in a particular area of imaging or the anatomy. For example, a neuroradiologist focuses on the head, brain and neck; a musculoskeletal radiologist interprets images of bones

and joints; a spine radiologist focuses on the upper, middle and lower spine; and a body radiologist interprets studies of organs and tissues primarily in the abdomen. Clinical studies have shown that focus in one particular area of the anatomy does lead to a higher level of accuracy overall, as well as a better ability to read difficult or unusual cases.

What can you do with this information?

When your physician asks that you have an imaging exam, ask about the provider he or she recommends – and get involved in the decision. Here are a few questions you may want to ask:

- Does the recommended imaging provider have sub-specialized radiologists?
- Does your physician know that radiologist well, and does he or she feel confident in their interpretations?
- What does the medical imaging provider's patient satisfaction data show?

Next time in Smart Healthcare Choices: "Finding Value in Medical Imaging."

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PART 3: WHAT DEFINES “VALUE” IN MEDICAL IMAGING?

As “consumer-directed health care” continues to grow, each of us as individuals is playing a larger role in choosing (and paying for) our healthcare services. Center for Diagnostic Imaging is committed to providing you with helpful information intended to assist you with choosing high-quality, cost-effective medical services.

One area of medicine that is frequently needed as part of accurately diagnosing an injury or illness – yet is not well understood – is medical imaging. In Parts One and Two of our Smart Healthcare Choices series, we discussed the importance of medical imaging overall and to your health care specifically, and provided a few tips on choosing the best provider for you and your family, and explained the critical role of the radiologist in your medical care.

Today, we turn our attention to one of the most critical aspects of medical imaging: value to you as the consumer.

1. **True or false:** The most important component of “value” is cost.
2. **True or false:** Medical imaging providers are virtually all the same as far as quality goes.
3. **True or false:** Costs for medical imaging exams don’t change much between providers.

Does it surprise you that the answer to all three of these questions is, “False?” You are not alone. Some related facts:

1. Cost is only ONE component of value.

Think of the last time you or a loved one made a significant purchase -- a car, for example. Chances are when you did so, you compared several things that were important to you. Typically, value when purchasing a product, we look at it in terms of “what we get for the money.” Because the real costs of healthcare services have only recently become more transparent to all of us -- and more our responsibility -- what we get for our money in healthcare is not easily understood. Here’s one way to consider value in medical imaging: **Value = Quality Outcomes + Service + Access + Convenience**

Cost

2. There can be differences in quality, service, access and convenience between healthcare providers.

The challenge has been in finding appropriate standards with which to compare providers, so a consumer can get an “apples to apples” comparison. Here are a few standards by which you can compare medical imaging providers -- and thus ensure that you get excellent care at a reasonable cost.

Service

Does the provider return results within 24 hours of the exam?
What is the provider’s overall patient satisfaction rate?

Access / Convenience

Can you get an appointment today or tomorrow?
Does the provider’s MRI suite feature large windows and an open floorplan?

Quality: Equipment

Is the provider’s equipment accredited by the American College of Radiology (national industry standard)?

Quality: Physicians

Do the radiologists that work there participate in a peer-review (clinical accuracy review) program?
Do the radiologists that work there specialize in particular areas of the body, improving proficiency?

3. There can also be significant differences between providers in cost.

Many consumers are not aware of the cost differences between providers, which can be significant. An example we’ve shared with you before is that it can cost about 40-50% less to have an MRI at a freestanding outpatient imaging center* than at the hospital. This translates to a significant reduction in your out-of-pocket cost, too – and can be more convenient.

**A freestanding imaging center is one not located within a hospital or billing through a hospital tax-ID.*

Once your doctor writes a prescription for a medical imaging exam for you or a loved one, it is up to you to decide where to go for the services. We hope this information helps you in that process.

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