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John Hickner, MD, MSc
Editor-in-Chief



Don't call me a provider

There is a severe shortage of doctors in the United States, and it's not because we are training too few physicians. It is because, shortly after graduation, doctors all morph into "providers."

This strange transformation was called to my attention about 10 years ago by a family physician from Wisconsin. He was quite indignant about being called a provider, and I decided I should be, too. I didn't spend 4 years in medical school and 3 in residency training to become a provider; I am a family physician and my patients want a family doctor—not a family provider.

(For history buffs, the word "provider" first appeared in a PubMed title in 1971, in an article titled "Home care, new provider approaches – physical therapy."¹ Not about doctors at all.)

About 4 years ago, the provider issue resurfaced when an ad caught my attention. Driving to work one morning listening to the radio, I heard a local garbage collector advertise his services—and urging listeners to contact one of his "providers" to obtain the company's services. I am sure he runs an excellent business and his

providers do an important job, but I do believe there is a fundamental difference between collecting garbage and taking care of people's health care needs.

In health care, the word *provider* has made its way into the lexicon, and it's not just outsiders who use it. I frequently hear doctors referring to other doctors as providers.

Why did we become providers? The answer is simple: Health insurers foisted the title upon us. They wanted a generic term to encompass all those who provide health care services for billing purposes. Because they reimburse physicians, chiropractors, physical therapists, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, occupational therapists, and more, they found it more efficient to lump all of us into one category.

Frankly, I think this is demeaning to all health care professionals, not just physicians. What about medical assistants, nurses, and lab techs? Why should they be lumped into one category when their training is quite different from one another?

Please join me in banishing the word "provider" from your vocabulary when you're referring to doctors, physician assistants, nurse practitioners, or any other health caregivers. As a department chair, I don't allow it to be used in any departmental discussions.

And while I doubt that we can change the insurance industry's use of the word, we can be more cognizant of our own word choices. Let's use the word that reflects who we are: doctors.

And while I doubt that we can change the insurance industry's use of the word, we can be more cognizant of our own word choices. Let's use the word that reflects who we are: doctors.

1. Blood H. Home care, new provider approaches - physical therapy. *NLN Publ.* 1971;(21-1432):79-81.

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