Assembling Your Osteoarthritis Healthcare Team

by ALI ESFAHANI

The Role of Your Osteoarthritis Healthcare Team

When I first developed arthritis in my spine, one of the greatest difficulties I had was finding an appropriate healthcare professional who could help diagnose me, understand my condition, and treat it properly. In fact, I went three years before I met an osteoarthritis doctor that I felt had the adequate background needed to help me.

Although it may seem absurd, I am not the only person who has struggled with this. Many relatives, friends, and other osteoarthritis (OA) sufferers I have talked to are often at a loss of who to turn to for proper treatment and management of their disease.

I went through a lot of trial and error in my journey towards achieving long-lasting pain relief — partly because I didn't know what services they could offer me. Thus, here is a brief synopsis regarding the role of specific healthcare professionals in helping a person with OA.

My hope is by understanding what services each healthcare professional can offer you, that you can achieve quicker and longer lasting pain-relief.

Physicians

Family Physician

A family doctor is the jack-of-all-trades when it comes to physicians. They are also likely the first doctor you'll seek out after developing pain and stiffness in your joints.

Many people like the idea that the person they have known for years who treats their other ailments can also help them with their osteoarthritis. Some family physicians are trained in giving steroid injections into a variety of joints and have background regarding proper management of osteoarthritis and chronic pain.

However, they may end up referring you to other specialties for care if your pain is refractory to initial treatment or have a more severe case of OA.

PM&R Physician

I am biased because I am an aspiring physiatrist (physical medicine and rehabilitation doctor), but I truly believe they are the physicians of choice when looking for proper management of osteoarthritis.

Physiatrists are physicians whose sole focus is to optimize the function and quality of life for people with physical limitations, including OA. The services they can offer are injections for the arthritic joints, nerve conduction studies, EMG, consultation on the correct medications or procedure to use, and proper referral to other healthcare professionals for rehabilitation of the arthritic joint.

Pain Management Physician

When I was first referred to pain management, it sounded like a scary, dark place to seek help for my OA. However, I achieved incredible pain relief after corresponding with pain management.

Seeing a pain specialist does not necessarily mean narcotics will need to be used in your treatment. In fact, they will likely suggest other modalities before having a discussion with you regarding narcotics.

Similar to PM&R physicians, pain management doctors do a variety of injections, but they specialize in these interventions. They are also trained in a variety of other therapies for pain-relief, such as radiofrequency ablations, pain pumps, and spinal stimulators.

These therapies are for people with OA who have yet to achieve relief through physical therapy, medications, and other conservative measures.

Orthopedic Surgeon

Of all the physicians listed, an orthopedic surgeon is usually the last physician you probably will seek regarding treatment of OA. You as the patient will probably end up there if none of the other physicians can help you with non-surgical means and believe surgical intervention is necessary.

Orthopedic surgeons can offer injections occasionally for arthritic joints, but obviously have more of an emphasis on surgical options, such as joint replacements (for the hip, knee, or shoulder), joint remodeling surgery, or even joint removal surgeries.

These options are only for those with severe OA who have not responded to conservative treatments and have been recommended by other physicians for surgery.

Next page: looking at the types of therapists for OA.

Therapists

Occupational Therapists

I have no personal experience with occupational therapists as a patient, but I have seen their invaluable help for those with physical limitations in the hospital setting. Occupational therapists can help treat patients with OA through the therapeutic use of everyday activities.

They help patients improve the skills needed for daily living and working. This can be through practice of everyday activities and they can help you improve motor skills and awareness of your own body.

They are particularly helpful during acute rehabilitation after surgery when you may require guidance on relearning certain functions.

Physical Therapists

I mentioned in a previous article that I had a bad experience with physical therapists, but that is definitely not the case for most people. Physical therapists play a very important role for those with OA.

If traveling to see a physical therapist is difficult for you, they often require only one visit where they teach you home exercises to perform on a daily basis. These exercises can help to increase flexibility and strengthen the arthritic joint, in hopes of alleviating the pain of OA.

Other services they offer include ice and heat therapy, the TENS unit, and helping stretch the arthritic joint.

Massage Therapists

Although massage therapists are a lesser-known kind of therapist, they can be very helpful for the management of OA. When I first developed arthritis in my spine, I saw a massage therapist frequently and it helped tremendously.

Through manipulation and use of a variety of other techniques, massage for osteoarthritis can help loosen up tight muscles and provide pain relief to specific joints.

Pharmacists

Pharmacists are instrumental in the management of your osteoarthritis. No matter what physician you go to, you will likely end up at the pharmacy counter for some sort of medication.

It is easy to get overwhelmed with medications once you start taking more than one of them and need to keep track of their long and confusing names.

Having a good relationship with a pharmacist has helped me immensely in my journey with OA; they are the best people to ask when you have concerns regarding the price of a medication, whether there are any notable side effects to be aware of, and any possible drug interactions that could exist with other medications that you are taking.

People don’t approach pharmacists enough for consultation regarding medications, despite their wealth of knowledge!

Everyone is different and a specialist or therapist that helps you may not be as helpful for another person, and vice-versa. However, by knowing what services each healthcare professional can offer you, my hope is that you can accelerate your path towards achieving quicker and longer lasting pain-relief.