

September 25, 2002

PATIENT POWERline from the desk of Marie Savard, M.D.

Re: The Rx Files

“The days when a family doctor had all your information in a manila folder, at the ready day and night, are long gone,” writes Dr. Marie Savard Nu’70 GrNu’72 M’76 in her book, *How To Save Your Own Life* (Warner) <http://www.drsavard.com/system-book.htm>. A nurse-turned-doctor- turned-patient-rights champion, she encourages individuals to take responsibility for their health by collecting all of their medical records themselves. “If anybody is going to keep track of your health history,” she says, “it’s going to be you.”

The health system today lacks any central repository for medical records, which are scattered between offices, computers, laboratories, and on microfilm at hospitals. “If you’ve moved around a lot,” Savard notes, “it’s a pretty sure bet your records didn’t follow you.” Considering that 80 percent of the information needed for diagnosis can come from a patient’s medical history, she asks, “Isn’t it ironic that that information exists piecemeal?”

Savard herself learned the importance of records-collection one evening, as recounted in her book, when her 73-year-old father was rushed to the hospital. By the time she arrived, he was gasping for breath, suffering from a potentially lethal arrhythmia. Doctors on duty were at a loss as to how they should treat him when the most likely culprit—a drug called digitalis—did not turn up in the bag of medicines that Savard’s mother had brought. “He is taking digitalis!” Savard said, but without the bottle present, and with medical-records offices closed for the evening, she was helpless to verify that fact.

Luckily, her story had a happy ending and her father was treated as if on digitalis. However, those who aren’t doctors may not have the memory for medications that Savard had.

Savard recommends carrying a short list of medications at all times as well as keeping a complete file of all medical records for visits to the physician. And to help the patient do just that, her second book, *The Savard Health Record* (Time-Life Books) [http://www.drsavard.com/system\\_record.htm](http://www.drsavard.com/system_record.htm), comes in the form of a three-ring binder, complete with definitions of terms a patient may find in health records, lists of necessary routine exams, and pockets for filing all important records. It also includes wallet-sized emergency health cards.

In *How To Save Your Own Life*, [http://www.drsavard.com/system\\_book.htm](http://www.drsavard.com/system_book.htm), and her website (<http://www.DrSavard.com>) she includes sample letters to send to former physicians requesting copies of records. Because many states allow doctors to discard information after two to seven years, requesting copies promptly is crucial.

Savard, who is senior medical consultant to the Lifetime TV series Strong Medicine and has been a health columnist for Woman's Day, notes that "Women consume two-thirds of the health-care dollar" and make 80 percent of daily health-care decisions for themselves, their children, parents, and partners. By becoming more informed on their medical status and history, "we [women] have the most to gain." However, she believes that everyone benefits from keeping personal health information.

A common concern is that new initiatives by patients will create new hassles for physicians. What patients must do, she says, is "join forces with doctors instead of either worshipping them or seeing them as an enemy."■

—Sarah Blackman C'03

To learn more about how to get involved more fully in your own health care please visit my web site at <http://www.DrSavard.com>.

Please feel free to share this message with your friends and family <http://www.drsavard.com/cgi-bin/friends.cgi>. I would also welcome your stories and questions, <http://www.drsavard.com/askdrsavard.htm>.

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