PICKING THE BEST?

How physicians get named to those top-doctor lists

BY SUZY FRISCH

Who doesn’t like a thumbs-up for their work every now and then? For Clare Kearns McCarthy, MD, getting named to a local list of top doctors provides welcome validation that other physicians value her skills as an orthopedic surgeon.

McCarthy says the lists can be helpful to patients and other physicians. Patients see making the list like getting a Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. “Patients like to see that you’re on the list. It’s a conversation starting point, and they are satisfied knowing their doctor is recognized. They are seeing someone who others trust as well,” says McCarthy, a hand and upper-extremity surgeon for Twin Cities Orthopedics in Edina who has appeared on MPLS.St.Paul Magazine’s list seven times and Minnesota Monthly’s three times. She also believes being on the lists may be helpful for physicians who need to refer patients. “It gives them a level of confidence when someone is on the list.”

There are numerous benefits to being named to a best-doctors list, say those who get cited. Physicians whose names appear on them often get props from their patients and other medical professionals. It also shines a light on their abilities, says Pamela Gigi Chawla, MD, a pediatrician and pediatric hospitalist at Children’s Hospitals and Clinics of Minnesota and senior medical director of primary care. Chawla, who has been honored by MPLS.St.Paul Magazine and Minnesota Monthly more than a dozen times, says Children’s receives a surge of calls from potential patients who want to see their doctors after the annual lists come out. “I don’t think people really look at this and say that this is about me,” she says. “It’s more about highlighting my institution and all the people who make what I do even possible.”

Peter Sershon, MD, chief of surgery at United Hospital and a urologic surgeon with Metro Urology in St. Paul, graced the cover of MPLS.St.Paul Magazine’s Top Doctors issue in 2013. He sees another benefit to the lists: They raise awareness about health and medical services. MPLS. St.Paul Magazine included an article about the robotic surgery program Sershon runs at United in conjunction with its Top Doctors list. He believes such attention might make screening for prostate cancer top of mind. “If this leads to more men with aggressive prostate cancer being diagnosed early because they read something about...
it and got checked—even if it’s one guy—then it’s worth it,” he says.

**Behind the scenes**

*Minnesota Monthly* started publishing its Best Doctors list about a decade ago, and *MPLS.St.Paul Magazine* has done Top Doctors lists for nearly 20 years. The issues in which those features appear happen to be some of the magazines’ best-sellers.

So how do doctors get named to these lists? *MPLS.St.Paul Magazine* outsourced its research a few years back to Key Professional Media, which publishes “Super Doctors” and “Super Dentists” lists in national magazines. To generate nominations each year, it sends paper ballots to 5,000 licensed metro-area physicians and registered nurses asking them for names of one or more doctors they or a loved one have seen or would go to for care. The firm also emails all area physicians asking for nominations. This year, *MPLS.St.Paul Magazine* received 1,386 nominations.

In addition, the company does its own research. Staff members tap health-related government websites, volunteer and humanitarian organizations, universities, hospitals, medical societies and other professional organizations to add names to the list of nominees, including those of doctors who might work in smaller clinics or highly specialized areas. “There are numerous resources we use,” says research director Becky Kittelson.

The research team then evaluates candidates based on years of experience, fellowships, leadership positions, hospital appointments, academic achievements and positions, professional activities, board certifications, publications and lectures, and other honors, awards and achievements.

The top-scoring doctors are named to a blue ribbon panel. Those physicians are asked to provide feedback on the nominees as well as other potential candidates from their specialty. Then the number crunching begins, taking into account all the points each candidate receives during the process, Kittelson says. From this, they generate the final list, which typically includes between 5 and 8 percent of local doctors.

“The rigor of our process is pretty astonishing,” says Deb Hopp, publisher of *MPLS.St.Paul Magazine*. She notes that rankings of other professionals are often done by those who use their services. “Our Top Doctors list has always been rankings by expert peers.”

For the magazine, the work is worth it, as newsstand sales for the Top Doctors issue are 30 to 40 percent over that of other issues, says Hopp. “It’s huge,” she adds. “People rely on it, and I think doctors are extremely proud to be on it. They’ve come to understand how carefully the research is done, and it’s repeated every year.” The magazine also gives clinics and health systems a plaque honoring the physicians named to the list and the opportunity to buy congratulatory ads in that issue.

*Minnesota Monthly* has a similar process. It obtains the names of all physicians

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with active licenses in the 11-county metro area, plus Olmsted County to capture Mayo Clinic. Previously, the magazine sent those physicians postcards requesting nominations, but this year it hired Michigan-based Professional Research Services to administer the process. Now that company emails a group of approximately 10,000 doctors asking them to nominate physicians in about 30 specialty and subspecialty categories, says Editor Rachel Hutton. During a three-week period, those doctors can log onto a website and vote for up to three physicians per specialty. Hutton says the response rate varies from year to year, but they get a representative sampling. The research firm then determines the number of votes doctors need before they are named to the list. That threshold can vary slightly each year, depending on the number of responses.

Minnesota Monthly’s final 2013 list included 509 names. In 2014, the magazine added several specialties including addiction medicine and Alzheimer’s disease, which expanded the list to about 700 doctors.

“The threshold is set so the number of doctors named is large enough that it gives people a good selection,” Hutton says. “We want to give people a few options in each category, if possible, but we also don’t want to overwhelm them with five pages of cardiologists.” She explains that they only include specialties that have enough practitioners so that there is a choice about who is named to the list. They also restrict both nominations and Best Doctor designations to local physicians who are in good standing with the Minnesota Board of Medical Practice.

Second opinions
Although most doctors feel honored to be chosen, many wonder why some truly excellent physicians don’t make the lists. “Some argue that it’s a popularity contest,” Hutton says. “But it’s only a popularity contest if that’s the way doctors are voting,” she adds. “It’s all in the hands of the doctors. We ask them to vote for peers they think are most qualified and whose performance is excellent, and we rely on them to vote with integrity.”

Jim Chase, president of the nonprofit quality improvement organization MN Community Measurement, says that when it comes to choosing a physician or clinic, he hopes patients also consider data on clinical outcomes and patient satisfaction. “The public thinks the lists are a good thing to have, and they are valid for what they are,” he says. “But it’s only providers who respond, and it’s not every provider, and being named might have to do with who you know and not really the data.” He notes that MN Community Measurement provides information on the quality of care at clinics and patient experience ratings on its Minnesota Health Scores website.

Tim Anderson, MD, a pediatrician with Southdale Pediatric Associates in Burnsville, agrees that magazine lists shouldn’t be the deciding factor when choosing a physician. Anderson, who takes care of babies and children with complex mental and physical conditions, says he thinks the reason he’s made MPLS. St. Paul Magazine’s Top Doctors list is because he works with so many hospital specialists and nurses, so he is known and his name comes to mind when they’re voting for pediatricians. Anderson says finding a doctor you feel comfortable with and can communicate with is what really matters. “Feeling listened to and understood at the end of a visit is the most important thing.”

Suzy Frisch is a Twin Cities freelance writer.