

## What's With the Wait??

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Despite our obsession with 4G speed, Americans still spend a significant portion of their lives waiting. Of course, opinions about what is worth waiting for vary widely. Millions of people visit theme parks like Disney World or Carowinds every year. They are willing to wait several hours in line for rides lasting 3-5 minutes. Patrons line up around the block prepared to wait more than an hour for an opportunity to eat at restaurants founded by celebrity chefs. Consider the die-hard bargain shoppers who camp out in front of major retailers on Thanksgiving night to be among the first shoppers in the store on Black Friday. And then there's the DMV or the post office during the holiday season – not to mention the flights delayed or cancelled due to weather or mechanical difficulties. While most folks may not consider these waits worth their return on investment, most have accepted that few alternatives exist, and thus endure the wait to register a vehicle, ship packages or get home from a long trip across the country.

Interestingly, few people consider healthcare worth waiting for. The majority of complaints we receive about our practice are related to wait time. Patients quickly assume that we do not value their time. Believe it or not, we do understand the frustration of being tied up at a physician's office when you need to be working, taking care of errands or spending time with family. At the same time, some legitimate factors contribute to wait time in a specialty practice that are not immediately obvious to patients.

Patients are often unfamiliar with the differences between a family practice or internal medicine office and a surgeon's office. Family practice and internal medicine physicians are generally in the office treating patients 4-5 days each week. The average orthopaedic surgeon, however, only has office appointments 2 -2.5 days each week because he is performing surgery the other days. The surgeon has half as much time each week as a family practice physician to evaluate patients with new problems, check on those with ongoing problems and follow-up with those who have recently had surgery.

The South Carolina (SC) Board of Medical Examiners website indicates that there are 5,863 physicians currently licensed in SC in the fields of internal medicine and family practice. In contrast, only 712 physicians are currently licensed as orthopaedic surgeons. So, there are approximately 8 internal medicine/family practice physicians for every 1 orthopaedic surgeon in SC. The 2010 census cites SC's population as 4,625,364. If SC's population was equally distributed among the state's physicians, each internal medicine/family practice physician would need to care for 789 people, while each orthopaedic surgeon would need to care for 6,496 people.

Thankfully every South Carolinian does not need treatment by an orthopaedic surgeon, but those that do are likely to have limited choices depending on where they live. The choices may be further limited by the sub-specialty expertise available in or near one's town. Many surgeons pursue additional training, called a Fellowship, in a particular sub-specialty after completing their residencies. Fellowship training further hones the surgeon's expertise in a particular area, equipping him to provide better care for patients in that area. All of the surgeons at Midlands Orthopaedics completed a year of fellowship training in a sub-specialty of orthopaedics: foot and ankle, sports medicine, total joint replacement, pediatric orthopaedics, hand or upper extremity, spine or traumatology. While all orthopaedic surgeons complete extensive training in general orthopaedics and can assess most orthopaedic illness and injury, patients are best served by the surgeon who has the most training in their particular problem. Ironically, this sub-specialization may further reduce the number of orthopaedists immediately available to the patient. Someone with a complex hand injury, for example, may need to travel further and/or wait longer for an appointment with a fellowship-trained hand surgeon.

**Simply stated, there are more patients with orthopaedic health needs than there are orthopaedic surgeons to treat them.** Census records indicate there are over 800,000 people between ages 55-75 in our state. These folks are in great need of orthopaedic care. As one of the most active aging populations in history, these patients are seeking to maximize advances in orthopaedic surgery that will get them back on the golf course, tennis court, running marathons or simply ensure their ability to continue living independently for many years to come.

At Midlands Orthopaedics, we strive to give as many patients as possible access to the orthopaedic sub-specialists they need to see during the 2.5 days each of these surgeons are in the office weekly. We accommodate work-ins for urgent needs, and we offer a walk-in clinic from 5-7pm M-F and 8:30-10:30am on Saturdays in an effort to further decompress daily schedules. We continually evaluate our office processes to eliminate unnecessary steps that could increase wait time. Unfortunately, the sheer volume of patients needing care from orthopaedic sub-specialists as compared to the number of surgeons available during any given week will frequently result in a significant wait time. That wait time may also be exacerbated by the somewhat unpredictable demand for imaging, casting and bracing services which must be provided to all patients on a given day by a limited number of staff members.

While we sincerely apologize for the wait time, we cannot eliminate it. We have enhanced our waiting rooms with guest wireless service and installed televisions in an effort to provide diversions for patients and their families as they wait. We encourage patients to bring reading material or other activities to ensure their waiting time does not feel like wasted time.

The second most frequent complaint we receive relates to the amount of time the surgeon spends with the patient as compared to the length of the wait. While few patients complain that a surgeon was actually rude to them, some report that the physician was less warm and friendly than they would have liked. It may be helpful to recognize that surgeons are inherently focused on identifying what's broken and fixing it as quickly as possible. The expertise derived from their sub-specialized surgical training in combination with the advanced diagnostic tools available in digital x-ray and MRI frequently enable them to accurately diagnose and prescribe treatment for illness or injury without a lengthy patient interview or exam.

Although many exceptions exist based on individual personality types, surgeons are commonly perceived to be less engaged with patients on a personal level than family practice or internal medicine doctors. Much of orthopaedics is mechanical. Surgeons excel in and are energized by identifying and repairing tears and breaks and replacing worn out parts. They are often able to quickly identify if a patient's complaint is related to an injury that time will heal, or one that will require the surgeon's intervention. Once that determination is made, the physician must rely on his personality rather than his surgical skill to explain it to the patient.

Some surgeons are great at providing detailed explanations and making every patient feel heard and understood. Some are not. Have you ever considered, though, which skill set is ultimately more important: the ability to accurately diagnose and repair an injury so the patient is restored to full function, or the ability to communicate in a warm, friendly and unhurried manner? Without question, the surgeon who is able to do both is a gem. Yet, if I have to choose, I want the doctor who is best equipped to identify and treat my problem, whether or not I enjoy his personality. And if he's able to appropriately diagnose me in 5 minutes, I consider the return on my investment of wait time much greater than the thrill of the 5 minute Disney ride after a 2 hour wait in line.

Please trust that I do not offer these explanations to diminish the importance of customer service in healthcare, or to imply that our patients' time is not valuable. On the contrary, we genuinely appreciate our patients. We recognize that they have invested significant time, expense and trust in our practice. We also recognize that they may choose to seek care elsewhere at any point. For those reasons, we will never give up our efforts to streamline our processes and reduce the wait time.

At the same time, we respect our patients too much to offer glib apologies and potentially false assurances that the wait will definitely be better next time. Rather, we wholeheartedly thank you for your business, and we respectfully request that you consider a shift in perspective. Take a moment to reflect on all the things you have waited for in your life. How many of them have been recreational? How many of them have been short-lived? How many of them have been life-changing? How many of them have restored your health? We remain hopeful you will ultimately consider the orthopaedic specialists at Midlands Orthopaedics to be worth waiting for.