

Visiting the doctor

The thought of fronting up to the doctor in a foreign country can be a rather nerve-wrangling experience. In her regular *Expatica* column, Cultural Clues, Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich lays down some markers for a family from South Africa about what to expect from visiting the doctor in Germany.

The Bennetts wrote:

We are new in Germany, and are not sure about what to expect from the family doctor. Can we just walk in?

Dear Bennetts family,

Your letter is gratefully received, but it's a big topic and unfortunately I can only scratch the surface.

Your GP (Hausarzt) will most likely have open surgery hours in the morning. You just filter in and say: "No, I am sorry I do not have an appointment but I am willing to wait."

In the afternoon doctors tend to have firmly scheduled appointments. Gate-crashing is a little difficult, but if you say you are in pain the doctor will have to see you. What is more, you do get past the ever so functional but bossy doctor's assistant.

Doctors still do house calls in Germany. So if you or a family member is feeling poorly, make an appointment and they will come to your bed. Now how is that for service!

When to call for an emergency doctor

In the evening or on the weekend, there is always a doctor on duty. This is the Notarzt, which means emergency doctor so you should not call in about a dripping nose. That is unless you really want to see a flashy BMW with red and white stripes and a blue light along with a personal Formula 1-type driver pull up in your driveway.

Airport medical services

Picture this: it is Friday evening, you are on the last flight home, tired and battling with a fever, an inflammation of the throat, the lozenges don't do any good... well you should stay at the airport as most airports (especially the big ones) have a full 24/7 medical service. A small, but very efficient pharmacy (Apotheke) is on site and is open!

Finding a specialist

In Germany, you can go directly to any specialist of your choice, but asking your Hausarzt for a recommendation may save you time "doctoring around". Germany's medical standards are excellent, but they come at a price.

After 9/11 many prominent people from Arab countries who faced visa delays in the US have started shifting over to Germany's prestigious medical institutes where the Halbgötter in Weiß (the demigods in white) reign.

Private patients

Although Germany is not a class society, you will notice if you say the "P" word, (private patient) your choice of appointments and therapies does look different.

Most expats have private health insurance. This will ensure you a smile from the doctor while shaking your hand and asking you how you are. Did you hear the till (cash register for the Americans) ring? This is costing you already, but let's face it, this is a consultation about your well being.

But Spaß bei Seite as the Germans say, (let's stop making fun here). For us normal mortals your relocation agent or network can pass you a list of English speaking doctors.

Don't wait until you are ill

Now here is my personal recommendation: don't wait to see the doctor until your ill or suffering from too much stress.

Instead go for a normal checkup/getting to know you visit, and all the important questions are out of the way: allergies, steady medication, the vaccination status of your children past and chronic ailments.

You should also know that most European physicians are reluctant to prescribe antibiotics out of fear you will develop a resistance to them. Do ask their opinion about homeopathic treatment for children.

Take a box of your present prescription drugs, as quite often it is carried under a different name, but with the content description neither of you can go wrong.

Over-the-counter drugs like aspirin are sold in the Apotheke at monopoly prices (whenever a shop/service provider is considered to be rather expensive, the Germans refer to it as an Apotheke) so you should stock up back home or on your next trip to some of the neighbouring countries.

Quiz time:

Q1: The central emergency number (*Notrufnummer*) is:

A: 110 B: 999 C: 112 or D: None of these

You don't know the answer? You are in deep trouble! Go and look it up and paste it next to your phone, now.

Q2: The German word for Emergency Admittance (like in ER, the TV program) is:

A: Notarzt B: Notdurft C: Notaufnahme or D: Notgroßchen

You pay with D in order to do B (your last penny in order to "to spend a penny") More likely you will find A in C. Got it?

Plan your next field trip to the local hospital, so that you know how to get there just in case!

This time I picked a Russian Proverb: "Expensive remedies are always useful, if not to the sick, to the chemist."

Looking forward to your questions,

Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich

Hilly van Swol-Ulbrich is managing partner of CONSULTus. Her website is WWW.Consultus.net. She reserves the right to decide which questions she considers relevant for her column. She will, however, not answer any questions dealing with tax or legal matters.