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## Infectious disease specialists are like detectives

DAVID J. MCCLAIN • DECEMBER 21, 2010

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*Editor's note: December is Infectious Disease Month. This column addresses what medical services infectious disease specialists provide.*

Infectious disease specialists are medical doctors trained and experienced in handling difficult and complicated problems related to a variety of infections. These include complicated AIDS, [skin](#) and soft-tissue infections, postoperative infections, bone and joint infections, multidrug resistant bacteria and other difficult microbes, tropical diseases related to overseas travel and unexplained fevers.

In many cases infectious disease [physicians](#) act like medical detectives: They examine difficult cases, looking for clues to identify the culprit and solve the problem.

An infectious disease physician has nine-10 years of specialized [education](#) and training, including four years of medical school, three years' training as a doctor of internal medicine or pediatrics and two-three years' specialized training in infectious diseases.

Most infectious disease specialists who treat patients also are board-certified, meaning they have passed a difficult certification examinations by the American Board of Internal Medicine in both internal medicine and infectious diseases.

Many common infections can be treated by one's personal [physician](#). A doctor might refer a patient to an infectious disease specialist in cases where an infection is difficult to diagnose, involves a difficult microbe or does not respond to treatment.

Infectious disease specialists also see healthy people who plan to travel to foreign countries or locations where infection risk is higher. In these cases,



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the specialist can help determine whether special immunizations or other preventive measures are necessary to protect travelers from disease.

The infectious disease specialist works with a patient's personal physician to determine which diagnostic tests are appropriate. If treatment is necessary, the specialist will work together with the personal physician to develop the best treatment plan.

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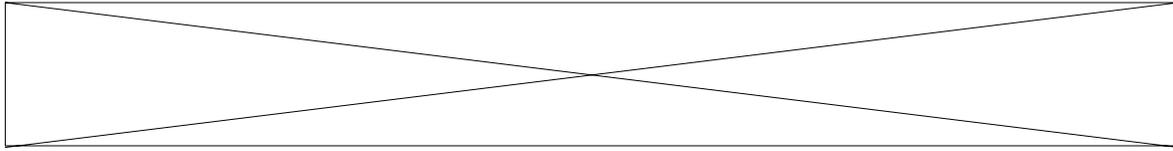
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Often the patient is asked to return to the specialist for an outpatient follow-up visit to check on progress, confirm that the infection is gone and help prevent it from coming back.

Infectious disease specialists may also serve as primary care physicians for people with HIV/AIDS, treating most illnesses and coordinating their patients' overall care.

Treatments for infections consist of medicines — usually antibiotics — to help battle the infection and prevent it from returning. These medicines may be given orally, in the form of pills or liquids, or administered directly into a vein via an IV tube.

Many infectious disease specialists provide IV antibiotic therapy through their offices, thereby either shortening the length of or even precluding the need for hospitalization.

In all of these cases, the specialized training and diagnostic tools of the infectious disease specialist can help determine the cause of an infection and the best approach to treatment.

A personal [family](#) physician is usually the best source of information for determining when infectious disease consultation may be useful or necessary. In addition, the Infectious Diseases Society of America, a professional organization of nearly 8,000 infectious disease physicians, scientists and other infectious diseases experts, can help point you in the direction of resources and additional information via its website, [www.idsociety.org](http://www.idsociety.org).

The HIV Medicine Association of IDSA, representing physicians and other health care professionals involved in the treatment of HIV/AIDS, can provide you with information on HIV/ AIDS resources online at [www.hivma.org](http://www.hivma.org).

Dr. David J. McClain is with the Asheville Infectious Disease Consultants, affiliated with Mission-St. Joseph Health System and a member of the WNC/Buncombe County Medical Society.



(Special to the Citizen-Times)

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