Describes studies that examine the physician-patient relationship in general, as well as those that specifically focus on physician-elderly patient interactions. Considers the particular difficulties of diagnosing and treating older patients because of their longer medical histories and multiple medical problems, as well as other factors such as ageist attitudes held by the health care provider or the older person him/herself. Describes the development and application of the Multi-Dimensional Interaction Analysis (MDIA), a tool to study physician-elderly patient interactions, which can be used in order to document the presence of ageism in the medical encounter. Reports findings from one study in which the MDIA was used to examine the similarities and differences in the content, process, language, and behavior of primary care physicians in 44 physician-older patient (aged 65 and over) and 44 physician-younger patient encounters. Concludes that physicians provided better information and more support to their younger patients on both physician-raised and patient-raised issues. Further notes that physicians were viewed as more condescending, abrupt, and indifferent with older patients, and that older patients and physicians were less likely to agree on the main goals, major topics, and primary medical problems of the encounter. (UH) (AgeLine Database, copyright 1991 AARP, all rights reserved)