

Patient satisfaction- An important Health Policy Issue

S Vasudevan^a

a. Department of Urology, Government Medical College, Trivandrum, Kerala; Kerala Medical Journal

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Patient satisfaction is an important and commonly used indicator for measuring the quality in health care. Patient satisfaction affects clinical outcomes, patient retention and medical malpractice claims. It affects the timely, efficient and patient centric delivery of quality health care. Patient satisfaction needs to be taken as an effective measure of the success of both doctors and hospitals alike.^{1,2} This fact is being recognised by physicians of all specialties – dermatologists, orthopedicians and emergency physicians all alike.¹⁻³

CHANGING SCENARIO

Over years the health care delivery has moved from small units to corporate hospitals with the latest technology, the advent of third party payers like insurance companies, the government and employee benefit plans, the explosion of and easy access to medical information through the internet and increasing litigation for unsatisfying results. With increasing professionalism and corporatisation the hospital sector increasingly views itself as a service industry. Hence patient satisfaction is of prime concern.

Evaluation of patient satisfaction is done with questionnaires. Higher patient satisfaction leads to several benefits for the health industry. More patient loyalty is ensured. Patient dissatisfaction can lead to alienation at a much faster rate. Organizations with higher patient loyalty command higher price and consistent profits. The reduced risk of malpractice suits, accreditation agencies focussing on service quality and increased personal and professional satisfaction are related to patient satisfaction.

Components

Service excellence depends on three factors - doctor, patient and the organization.

1. Doctors have to give the best care and lead the team to achieve the goal of a satisfied, non complaining patient. The doctor is expected to make eye contact, express concern, and show courtesy, listen to and understand

their problems and inform and explain treatment matters, give undivided attention. They are expected to share responsibility, secure confidentiality and privacy. Patients expect their doctors to be punctual, behave cordially and communicate in their language. They expect care, concern and courtesy in addition to professional competence and good results. It always helps to recognise that patients expect personal relationship, a charter of rights, minimal waiting time and correction of shortcomings by feedback. Hospitals and employees should have the right attitude, work culture and good policies. Attention should be paid to providing smart, efficient and intelligent telephone service, good office appearance and minimal waiting time. Patient feedback is very vital for improving patient services.

2. Role of the patient- Today the patient sees himself as a buyer of health services. Accepting this, it should be recognised that every patient has certain rights, thus placing emphasis on quality healthcare delivery. To be able to do this, hospitals need to function like a service industry. This requires the employment of HR professionals and management graduates. Third party payers have recognised that patient satisfaction is an important tool for the success of their organisation and regularly monitor patient satisfaction among their customers. In the USA physician bonuses are linked to patient evaluation of their doctor's interaction with them. These players have recognised that higher patient satisfaction leads to many benefits for the health industry:

- I. Better patient loyalty
- II. Improved patient retention
- III. Less vulnerability to price wars
- IV. Consistent profitability
- V. Better staff morale and better productivity
- VI. Reduced malpractice suits
- VII. Accreditation issues since all such agencies like International Organisation for Standardization (ISO), National Accreditation Board for Hospitals (NABH) focus on quality.
- VIII. Increased personal and professional satisfaction

Corresponding Author:

Dr. S Vasudevan, MS, MCh, Associate Editor, Kerala Medical Journal; Additional Professor, Department of Urology, Government Medical College, Trivandrum, Kerala - 695011, India. Email: periamana@gmail.com

3. Hospital as an organisation - building and sustaining a service oriented organisational culture is important for the success of any organisation. Several changes are needed in the management strategies with the goal of serving better and improving the service quality.

The areas that need attention to minimum requirements and standards include:

1. Telephone service needs to be cordial
2. Office appearance needs to be adequate and aesthetic
3. Waiting time should be kept minimum
4. Doctor-patient interaction needs to be constantly monitored
5. Patient education increases patient satisfaction, reduces litigation and improves compliance to treatment
6. Problem solving ensures a good system to attend to and handle complaints.
7. Feedback given by patients helps improve the work of the physician, place and also the system.

CONCLUSION

Patient satisfaction is an attitude. Delivery of patient-focussed health care needs to be sustained and always

seeking ways to further improvement. A satisfied patient is a practice builder.^{4,5}

END NOTE

Author Information

Dr. S Vasudevan, Associate Editor, KMJ;
Additional Professor, Department of Urology,
Medical College, Trivandrum, Kerala, India.

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