

Maintaining a Patient's Identity as a Human being is the key to driving satisfaction and loyalty.

By: William Duffy RN, MJ, CNOR

Patient satisfaction and loyalty have been the focus of healthcare institutions for decades with many institutions achieving short episodes of progress balanced by periods of retreat. Despite heroic efforts in some institutions, patients' perceptions of care have generally continued on a downward trend. Why is this happening and can we really do something about our customer's perceptions of care?

I believe the key problems with our lack of progress on patient satisfaction stem from the focus on efficiency, the explosion of technological care, and a growing presence in the work place of practitioners who are more comfortable communicating electronically than in person. Efficiency is a rock solid business strategy that looks to optimize the use of potential resources. It thrives in achieving productivity gains when the provision of care is delivered through a manufacturing model. Resources are allocated based on the expected level of effort that would be needed to accomplish the task. A key issue with this model and patient satisfaction is the focus on the average need expectation for patients in the allocation of resources and the lack of development in care gives to identify patients who need constant or even periodic deviations from their expected care allotment. These patients feel ignored or uncared for when their basic needs are not met.

The growth of technology further distracts healthcare providers from focusing on the needs of patients. Many healthcare practitioners are either baby boomers who are generally adapting to the technological world and need to dedicate more attention to the requirements of technology or a generation X 'er/Y'er who is very comfortable with the technology world but may not have the same interpersonal skills of baby bombers. In both cases the tendency is to focus a little more on the technology than the patient which sends a subliminal message to our customers that the equipment is more important to us than they are. We know in fact this is not the case but it is a message patients perceive.

Finally, the explosion of email and text messaging is creating another barrier to interpersonal interaction where healthcare practitioners are communicating amongst themselves using these mediums when in the past they used to have conversations. More and more patients are receiving their health updates and results through email and other electronic media. One dimensional communication while efficient cannot replace the robust three dimensional communication that comes from face to face interaction. In face to face communication the parties can read body language, tone, inflection and eye contact to interpret the subliminal message we add to our stated words. Without the other two dimensions patients lose the ability to connect with their provider and develop a sense of relationship and caring that is needed for loyalty and satisfaction.

The key to success in improving patient loyalty and satisfaction is to work with your team to make sure they establish a relationship with their patients. I believe the best way to establish a relationship is to focus on making the patient feel like they are a human being. Remember, from the patient's perspective we strip them of everything that

identifies them as a human being. We take away their clothes and have them put on a gown that is barely adequate to make someone feel proper covered, we ask their family and friends to leave, we remove their jewelry and we put them in a strange environment with restrictive rules regarding movement, eating, sleeping etc. I am not sure what can be more dehumanizing than that. If a care giver can overcome the barriers discussed above and make a patient feel like they still are a person who is a valued decision making individual then you will beat the battle of patient satisfaction and loyalty.

Caring for human beings is not that complicated if we just care for the human being first. The hospitals that capture this concept will be the hospitals that survive and thrive in the new public reporting era of healthcare.