

**Improving
patient experience –
from initiatives to a
sustainable culture change**

**Executive
Summit
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Summary

Patient experiences in the healthcare process are characterized by numerous personal interactions, experiences, and perceptions and, in addition to the safety and quality of the medical measures, play a prominent role in modern, value-based healthcare. Healthcare service providers around the world are increasingly turning their attention to improving patient experiences. This requires a lasting culture change within healthcare institutions that is supported and demonstrated by top management, involves all the actors, and, last but not least, also focuses on an appreciative work environment for the employees. Respectful and empathetic communication and cooperative involvement in a transparent and individual needs-based healthcare process are essential, in addition to uncomplicated access to care, such as the ability to arrange appointments quickly or have online office hours. In light of the current role of patients as informed and digitally savvy consumers of healthcare services, it will also be increasingly important for service providers to understand genuine service excellence as part of their corporate culture.

The subjective side of healthcare

Medical anthropologists argue that Western medicine, at its core, focuses on the body. Medical advancements are, to a large extent, based on researching – and mastering – objectifiable procedures and properties of human anatomy, physiology, and cell biology. However, in real-life healthcare situations the patient faces the doctor or nurse as a person. Each patient is a subject with human interactions, experiences, and needs.

This subjective side of healthcare is decisively shaped by today's conditions. On the one hand, the healthcare system is changing to a more value-based and patient-focused care in which the results are the focus, and which are of immediate importance to the patient themselves and their long-term quality of life. On the other hand, the external social conditions for medicine have also changed, thanks to the digitization of all areas of life. Patients are no longer just people seeking help, but digitally savvy and informed consumers of healthcare services. With all of this, the ethical ideal of more humane and cooperative medicine has not lost any of its relevance.

Understanding and improving patient experiences in the healthcare process has therefore become a fundamental concern – and in some cases already a recipe for success – for many healthcare providers. It requires long-term culture change and the engagement of all actors to combine medical excellence with positive personal interactions and experiences.

Patients first means people first

One example of a transformation process focused on the subjective patient experience is the restructuring of the Cleveland Clinic in Cleveland, Ohio. “Formerly, compassion was a low point in our workflows,” admits Susannah L. Rose, Scientific Director of Research in the Office of Patient Experience at the Cleveland Clinic. It has been one of the institution’s stated goals for a number of years to systematically include the individual perspectives of patients and their families in health-care delivery and deal with them as people on equal footing. As Rose explains, “Patients first means people first.”

Michael C. Bennick, Medical Director of the Patient Experience and Chairman of the Patient Experience Council for Yale New Haven Health System, a large non-profit provider based in Connecticut, also stresses the necessity of a change in perspective. “For us, the hospital has to be more than a place where we work, it has to be a place where patients come to heal,” says Bennick. For many people, a hospital stay is associated with fears and traumatic experiences, which need to be reduced – for example, addressing patients by name, ensuring adequate rest, avoiding unnecessary disruptions and procedures, encouraging activities, and providing clearly understandable discharge information.

Jason A. Wolf, President of the Beryl Institute in Southlake, Texas, an independent, globally active organization committed to improving patient experience, claims that clear and respectful communication in daily clinical practice is essential for patient experiences. Obvious, minor details, such as a doctor introducing him or herself by name, correctly addressing the patient, asking him for permission to enter his room, promptly answering questions, and not leaving the patient with questions about the next step at the end of an examination apparently play a large role in this. In the meantime, many healthcare service providers view a patient-centered attitude to be part of their corporate philosophy, says Wolf. “The focus on patient experience is global and growing.”

It is clear that patient experiences go far beyond (momentary) patient satisfaction. “Experience is the sum of all interactions, shaped by an organization’s culture, that influence patient perceptions across the continuum of care,” defines Wolf. This includes the patient’s cooperative involvement in the care process, its existential crises, and experiencing compassion as well as religious needs or culture-specific communication patterns and habits.

Patient experiences are also molded – and often first and foremost – by quite practical things, adds Rose. For example, the fact that they can speak to a doctor or nurse at a point of contact for the care system after a very short wait, even without an appointment, plays an enormous role for many patients. Online communication and online consultations have also become an essential element of modern, patient-centered healthcare.

Building a culture of engagement

The basic prerequisite for improving patient experiences in the healthcare process is a culture of engagement and reciprocity – and a sustainable culture change within care facilities themselves. “What’s key is that an attitude change has to be supported by the top management of an organization,” explains Rose. It is also important that patient experiences are not solely characterized by the hospital staff and are also based on the engagement and behavior of the administrative staff or service and cleaning staffs.

The Cleveland Clinic has now implemented systematic communication training for its doctors and nursing care staff. The core element of the culture change are patient surveys about their experiences in the care process, with the goal of receiving continuous feedback, while at the same time involving the patients and their families more in the process. Patients can also rate the staff online. “We put star ratings and quotes on our website – also those that are not so hot,” explains Rose.

It is obvious that patient-centered care is only possible in the long term if the doctors, nursing staff, and other staff members also feel valued and included in their work situation. Positive patient experiences require the positive experiences of the staff – and therefore good employee management.

Meanwhile, studies show that a culture of engagement not only has a positive effect on the patient experiences, but also the financial performance of the hospitals. “Hospitals with high patient-reported experience scores also have higher profitability,” says Jason Wolf. This may be due to the fact that healthcare service providers who change their attitude towards patients also take a closer look at their workflows and design them to be better and more efficient. On the other hand, subjective experiences play an important role in which care facility the patients choose for themselves or recommend to others.

From patient advocacy to service excellence

In light of the modern role of patients as informed and digitally savvy consumers of healthcare services, experiences and evaluations are more economically important than ever before. “A focus on patient experience is a competitive advantage in an environment where patients navigate the system,” confirms Sven Gierlinger, who formerly held a series of leadership positions with the Ritz-Carlton Hotel Company and is now Chief Experience Officer at Northwell Health, a large integrated healthcare organization in Great Neck, New York. Patient experiences are also sometimes considered in the reimbursement of healthcare services, especially in the United States.

The healthcare system could actually learn some things from the hotel industry, states Gierlinger. The patients’ well-being is becoming increasingly important. “Hospitality” and “healthcare” are not direct opposites anymore. Instead, in addition to medical safety and quality, and representing the concerns and needs of patients (advocacy), patient-centered care must also contain a character of genuine service, explains Gierlinger, who advocates for a new guiding principle of service excellence: “Healthcare is a place where the genuine care and comfort of our patients is our highest mission.” When applied to the daily clinical routine, this culture of “every moment matters” includes “a warm welcome with great first impressions, a clean and appealing environment, competent, kind, and consistent interactions, and the ability to fix problems expeditiously and make the patient experience hassle-free.”

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