

Customer Satisfaction: Are Hospitals “Hospitable”?

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We are inundated these days with opinion polls and surveys. Politicians query the electorate to determine popular policies; Nielsen ratings inform us how many households watch which television programs; and *U.S. News & World Report* claims to rank the “best” colleges, graduate schools, and mutual funds. All of these surveys purport, of course, to reflect the opinion and preference of the citizen, TV viewer, student, or investor. Many are of dubious value, but all attempt to assess, to a greater or lesser degree, customer satisfaction.

Of course, some customer satisfaction surveys are extremely useful. If one wishes to dine in New York, or any other major metropolitan area in the United States, the ubiquitous Zagat Survey guide is indispensable. Danny Meyer, one of the most successful restaurateurs in Manhattan, owns a half a dozen or so of the 18,000 restaurants in New York City. The Zagat Survey guide has consistently ranked his restaurants among the most popular in New York year after year. He attributes his success over the last 20 years to a commitment to hospitality rather than service alone—the perception of the diner that the restaurant staff really cares about the diner’s total experience, not only that the food is delicious and served without delay.

Danny’s staff is trained to ensure that the diner feels comfortable, welcomed, and at home; they are trained to be hospitable: “the reception of guests with liberality and goodwill” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). In fact, the modern definition of hospital is derived from its medieval origin (sounding very much like today’s restaurant): “a place for the shelter and care of pilgrims and guests” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). As practitioners in the field of medicine, we have, I believe, much to learn from the restaurant field; both are service industries.

Dr. William A. Grana, a department editor of this journal, has written eloquently in these pages recently of the hospital experience of his ailing mother. He describes her care in a “magnet hospital,” cited for excellence by the American Nursing Association, as competent but not “caring”—that is to say, serviceable but without being hospitable. He concluded that hospitals have lost their way, focusing more on excellent survey scores than on compassionate care of patients. This may be true.

The point is, I believe, that many hospital surveys measure excellence in clinical outcomes but fail to reflect “hospitality,” the delivery of that care with grace



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and a concern for patient well-being. For example, the Department of Health and Human Services and the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations currently rate hospitals on appropriate care of patients with cardiac disease and pneumonia. Curiously, these regulatory agencies measure only one element relevant to the practice of orthopedic surgery: the prevention of in-hospital-acquired infection. These surveys assess treatment but not how that care is delivered; service, but not “caring.”

Nevertheless, outcome assessment of hospital care is, and will continue to be, an ever-increasing fact in our professional lives. In fact, Medicare has recently begun a pilot study linking increased hospital reimbursements to improved clinical outcomes, essentially a performance-based bonus system for hospitals. While we can complain that these assessments fail to measure true quality of care or assess real “caring,” I believe that the practicing orthopedic surgeon must participate in these exercises sponsored by regulatory agencies.

Given the reality of market influences in the healthcare arena, hospitals can ill afford not to strive to be labeled “best” or “magnet” centers of care. Patients and third-party payers place a high value on such designations. Furthermore, outcome assessments and compliance with “best practice” standards are, indeed, essential and important measures of quality of care. However, in the assessment of overall quality, such surveys are necessary but not sufficient.

“...remember the ancient origin of “hospital.”

In the current climate in which surveys of all sorts are the rage, we would do well to remember the ancient origin of “hospital” and appreciate the “mission” that the hospital and restaurant industries currently share: service in a caring environment. Hospitals must also be hospitable. ■