

health systems

Physicians Leading Change

What Physicians Can Do to Improve Patient Care and to Enhance Their Everyday Work Experience

The following is adapted from a resource guide titled Creating the Best Place to Practice: What Physicians Can Do to Improve Patient Care and to Enhance Their Everyday Work Experience. This guide was developed in May 2003 by the Organizational Research Department at the request of Kaiser Permanente's Care Experience Council. This chapter—Focus on the Patient—is especially appropriate as physicians lead efforts in providing patient-centered care. —Editor

Introduction

What's in it for me? Every physician is a leader, and all physicians have direct influence on their work environment. Whether in a formal leadership role or not, physicians greatly influence the work environment. Physicians are leaders in their health care teams because of training as well as from a legal perspective. The way you conduct yourself and your relationships with others can either lead to, or detract from, a work culture that supports patient care and service. Research suggests a relation between physician behaviors that create a work environment of teamwork, collaboration and sup-

port, and the ability of all health care team members to provide patients with a high-quality care experience.^{1,3}

Your Role as Patient Advocate

This section focuses on behaviors you can adopt to influence patient satisfaction and promote service and health care quality. These behaviors help you promote a service culture through words, actions, systems, and processes.

As you know, your primary responsibility as a physician is the well-being of your patient. Because of your deep understanding of your patients' needs, you are the perfect advocate to lead changes to health care systems and processes. To successfully lead change as a patient advocate and as leader of the health care team, you are in a perfect position to determine what is important to your patients. By spending time inquiring about their needs and their experiences with the health care system, you can assess how well your care processes perform against those stated patient needs. You will then be in a position to advocate for changes that really matter to your patients—changes that will improve their care experience.

The best physician-leaders always behave as if they have a patient at their elbow, and they bring the patient's perspective into every conversation.

James Reinertsen, MD,
"Physicians as leaders in the improvement of health care systems"²

Patient Needs—Obtaining Important Feedback

First, you can use opportunities to obtain patient feedback. Here are some specific questions you can use to obtain a better understanding of your patients' needs, as well as questions to assess how these expressed needs are being addressed by you and your team.

- Ask questions about their needs:
 - How would you define high-quality service? High-quality care?
 - What is most important to you when you visit your doctor?
- Talk to your patients about the service they receive:
 - How are we serving your needs?

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–What do you like and dislike about our service and care?⁴

–How can we improve our service?⁴

–What are we not providing that you feel we should provide?⁵

- Observe interactions between staff and patients.

–What processes (for example, scheduling appointments or check-in) work smoothly from the perspective of both patient and staff?

–What processes require unnecessary multiple steps or potential rework?

–What barriers do staff encounter as they try to serve the patient?

- Encourage staff to be “listening outposts” to obtain information about members.

–What has staff learned from patients about what helps or hinders meeting patient needs?

–What complaints are heard from patients about services or processes?

Tell your patients that their feedback to you about the care and service they receive is highly valued and will be used to make service improvements.

How To Use The Information

Personal Application

Use this knowledge to better serve your patients. Commit to quality through your actions and words.

- Set the tone for your team by modeling excellent service to patients and letting your staff know that the same sort of behavior is expected from them.
- Understand the unique needs of your patients based on dif-

The ability to understand the customer’s needs and wants can be summed up in a simple phrase: “Always be Learning.”

— Karl Albrecht and Ron Zemke, *Service America!: doing business in the new economy*⁵

“Quality service is a top down affair. It starts at the top or it doesn’t start.”

— Karl Albrecht and Ron Zemke, *Service America!: doing business in the new economy*⁵

ferences in background and culture.

- Participate in improvement efforts when asked.
- Talk about issues of quality honestly and openly. Work with your team to create a “blame-free” environment so issues of quality can be discussed.

Share Information

It will be important to then share what you know about member and patient needs. Communicate to your team the importance of good patient service and its place in the delivery of quality care. Ask team members to contribute their knowledge of members’ needs. Encour-

age discussions of patient feedback at team or department meetings.

- Repeatedly communicate to all team members the importance of service quality in your team.
- Discuss how your team is an important link in the chain of meeting patient needs.
- Communicate that the contributions of all team members are valued and important to fulfilling the team’s patient satisfaction goals.
- Before your team makes a decision that may affect your patients, ask
 - “Does this solution contribute to meeting our patients’ needs?” “Is this really patient-centered care?”
- If patient satisfaction data are available for your department or team, use these results to improve service.
- Support, encourage, and empower team members to solve member problems on the spot.
- Examine from the patient’s perspective the systems and processes of your department to identify barriers to service.
- Ask staff for their ideas on ways to improve. Work as a group to implement solutions.
- Make a point of drawing together diverse groups when

Checklist for Focus on the Patient

- I talk to patients about how well their health care needs are being met.
- I participate in discussions regarding patient feedback and performance data with my team.
- I identify barriers to service and quality and encourage others to do so.
- I get involved in fixing problems and encourage others to do so.
- I model high-quality service behavior for my team members.
- I demonstrate my commitment to quality through my actions and words.

discussing issues or solving problems to fully consider different points of view.

- Always ask your team as well as your patients the question, – “*How can we improve?*”

Summary

As physicians take the lead in creating patient-centered care, the ability to understand patient needs and translate those needs into meaningful improvement in the health care environment will require a new set of skills. Understanding patients' experiences outside your exam room, leveraging staff to work as a team, serving as a role model for

service behavior, and sharing your knowledge are different from what makes the solo practitioner successful. These are the behaviors that make leaders successful. You can begin the process by slowly adopting the behavior mentioned in this article in a manner that fits your style. Small changes in behavior can reap big rewards. It is important to take the first step. ❖

References

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Quality Improvement

Quality improvement has little chance of success in health care organizations without the understanding, the participation, and in many cases the leadership of individual doctors.

Donald Berwick, MD, Sounding Board, New Eng J Med 1989;320:53-6.