

Importance of Communication in Patient Care Management

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“Provide continuity of care – in the hospital and after you depart”

The Indian health care industry is undergoing a period of transformation, marked by increased competition, a heightened focus on quality and performance improvement, and the rapid growth of the private health care sector.

Patient care is an area, which needs utmost attention in the healthcare arena. Communication plays a very major role in patient care. With the rise in the paying capacity people became more demanding than receiving something that is provided to them. This article would shed some light on how hospitals and other healthcare centres, by following some simple rules, can bracket their patients by providing them with top-class services to their fullest satisfaction.

Retaining Regular Patients in OPD

It is always better and more profitable to have regular patients than newly-generated ones in the general hospitals but in eye care it is equally important to get new patients because of the increased rate of cataract incidence and it is one time intervention. But the regular patients in Glaucoma, Retina, Low Vision Rehabilitation and Orbit specialties always promote services through their word of mouth. To retain regular patients, there should be well-organized plan to maintain relationship with them. This can be done through customizing and regularizing the available patient database and to get detailed information on OP, IP, specialty services of patients visit on weekly, monthly and yearly basis.

Their information and their e-mail address will help send the latest and updated information and message through e-mail at any convenient time. The messages could be classified as:

- (a) Greetings during national/state festivals and local functions.
- (b) To greet patients at birthdays or marriage anniversaries. (Indian scenario is different but it can be done if we capture the data)
- (c) To inform their follow-up or their surgery date.
- (d) Informing new updates in treatment/fee structure etc.

The above factors will help keep in touch with regular visiting patients and it would make a positive impact on the patients that the hospital is taking care of their health.

Out-Patient Department Communication

A. With the Patient

- Greeting the patients
- Calling with respect and kindness
- Patience to queries and doubts
- Informing the procedures and flow in advance
- Positive body language to the patients and bystanders

B. Within the Department

- Smooth coordination of the activities
- Informing the duty and responsibilities
- Exchange and discussion of patient details
- Coordination of different domains (Doctors, Nurses, Counsellors and Administration)

Feedback Mechanism at OPD and Eliminating the Gaps

An efficient feedback mechanism at the OPD will help understand patients' requirements in clinical and supportive services. This mechanism can be designed through placing visible suggestion registers/box, collecting information through well-designed questionnaire, by nominating active enumerator and forming Regular Patients Association (RPA) at the

hospital. A periodical meeting with RPA will help to gradually eliminate dissatisfaction among patients. At the same time, the feedback information will also help streamline working system according to latest requirements to serve better in this competitive environment of growing health sector.

Normally, doctors are busy with their work schedules and surgeries. They may not be able to answer all queries raised by the patients, resulting in less communication. To eliminate such gaps and to increase the feeling of care to the patient, hospitals can create a mechanism of better communication. It can be like recognizing the patient from previous visit, enquiring on their family members, their health etc. Say for example, in Aravind Eye Hospitals there is a counselling section for all the specialities as well for general ophthalmology that communicates all the clinical and non-clinical details to the patients and clear all their doubts. To keep personal care, the doctor can note down health or personal problems of the patient's family at the corner of the medical record. He can recollect the information and enquire about that at the time of next visit. This kind of mechanism will definitely help to keep good rapport with patients.

Waiting Status Information

As a layman, if you enter in a hospital, what you will expect at first? You are registered at the OPD counter and now are waiting for the doctors' call. How long you have to wait? When you will be called? How many more steps and procedures you have to take? How long it will take to finish each procedure? Where is the ending point? Who will help to clear such doubts?

There are ways which can be adopted to tackle such a situation, like keeping different display boards showing how long the patient have to wait in each procedure, having direction signs at the OPD entrance etc, this can be showed through flow charts at the reception. Aravind system doesn't allow any patient go alone from point to point, there is always guide to help them out and there is sign board too for non patient visitors and bystanders.

Patient Counselling System

A satisfied patient will inform five people about the services; while an unsatisfied one will inform 10-15 people about poor service and inferior treatment. The unsatisfied patient will then begin to shop for the competitors. Thus, hospitals not only lose the unsatisfied patient to the competitor, but even worse, he will probably take many other potential patients with him/her. To overcome such difficulties, healthcare service providers should focus on strengthening communication systems.

Patient counselling is one of the strongest tools that will help get satisfied patients and retain regular patients. It is always recommended to have separate patient counsellor for each specialty department to promote and keep track of the follow-ups to the specialty service in the system. The following are the benefits that the hospitals will get, once they place a patient counsellor at the hospital:

1. Clearing doubts, explanation on the advice given by doctors on patient, their health and further treatment etc.
2. Review check-up date, treatment/surgery fee, admission details (for surgery patient).
3. Medication details, test/examination details etc.

Alternatively, to keep in touch with the patients and to ensure their comfort and timely presence for surgery, communication can also be done by sending post cards (written reminder) periodically or by sending short message service (SMS). In this way, hospitals can keep contact and retain their regular follow-up patients and have healthy and better relations with them.

Patients become "problem patients" when they cross a limit that comes into conflict with the judgment and worries, rules, boundaries that is not approachable, anticipated behaviour, or expectations on the ophthalmologist or the organization. Hospital should be ready to capture the expectation of the patients and set the manpower and other resources accordingly.

When a patient crosses fixed legal or ethical boundaries, problem resolution is usually straightforward because the doctor or the hospital

has the support of existing rules or laws with which to respond to a problematic situation, such as when a patient steals something from your office, falsifies a prescription, or treats one of your employees rudely. More difficult are patients actions that, although not clearly immoral, unethical, or illegal, nonetheless lead to conflict or frustration.

Whether the patients receive quality care and the best possible patient care is availed by the patient can be checked through reviewing the below mentioned points. And these points can be reviewed in locally accepted method in each hospital. They are:

- Access to care and information at all times
- Minimal waiting for processes of care and it is informed well in advance
- Focus on the clinician-patient relationship
- Individuals encouraged to participate in their own care
- Knowledge-and evidence-based care is the standard
- Seamless communication and coordination of care
- Financial performance to ensure sustainability
- Patient and practice management based on real-time data, including measures of process, satisfaction, finance, outcomes and epidemiology
- Continual improvement and waste reduction in all processes and services

Communication of Counselling Department

A. With the Patients/attendees

- Encourage questions from patient
- Address questions and concerns of patient
- Speak to patient in calm manner
- Use active listening skills
- Address possible problems/side-effects of any necessary procedure
- Make patients aware of any possible future risks (e.g. future repercussions of uncontrolled diabetes)
- Explain doctor's diagnosis in understandable terminology

- Direct patients to necessary stations or explain location to patients
- Tell patients all information relevant to case
- Convince patient of necessity of procedure if needed
- Provide emotional support and personal empowerment for patients
- Supply nonverbal directions about care specifications (e.g. written directions for patients caretakers)
- Use such mediums as the telephone to address patients concerns once they have left the hospital

B. Within the Department

- Inform nurses about concerns of patient
- Consult doctors about patients' questions
- Inform other counsellors when away from posted station
- Consult appropriate hierarchical position in case of question or concern
- Attend monthly counsellors meetings

Importance of Communication in Patient Care:

A trusting relationship with patients and their families is built on open and honest communication. However, today's health care environment makes good communication among patients, families, and caregivers harder and harder to achieve. Hospital stays are shorter, medical care is more technologically complex, resources are constrained, and there is a growing need for patients and families to have more information about, and involvement in, care decisions.

The Communications standards are

- Complete respect for the patient
- Understanding and addressing the needs of the patient
- Appropriate communication between departments when necessary
- Provide accurate and justifiable estimates of waiting time
- Discuss the concerns of patients about delivered product
- Be able to gauge true concern of patient

- Be aware of the patient flow and patient expectation
- Impart necessary advice to trainees or fellow workers
- Encourage questions from patient

Department communication to ensure patient satisfaction

Medical Records Department Communication

- A. With the patient
 - Distribute all medical records accordingly
 - Inform patient of necessary payment
 - Answer any economic concerns of the patient
- B. Within the Department
 - Staff communication and departmental meetings
 - Patient and other stakeholders opinion review
 - Information flow
 - Coding and MIS communication

Refraction Department Communication

With the patient

- Explain all necessary tests to patient
- Gauge the literacy capabilities of the patient
- Understand personal history of the patient (e.g. age, diseases, occupation/daily routine)
- Know lifestyle patterns of patient
- Know habit of use of any previously prescribed eye-ware
- Explain all follow-up treatment that is necessary for the patient
- Explain any post-treatment practices (e.g. eye exercises)
- Inform patients about the necessity to change glasses every two years
- Explain proper use and handling of glasses
- Educate patients about the necessity of yearly eye check-ups

A. Within the Department

- Help manage flow of patients
- Inform trainees of strategies
- Attend weekly departmental meetings

Ward Department Communication

A. With the Patient

- Address concerns of the patient
- Inform patients about the importance of post-operative hygiene
- Monitor the vitals of patients with any problems such as heart disease
- Create environment where the patient feels comfortable and safe
- Inform relatives of their responsibilities in care for the patient
- Administer the necessary eye drops and care to the patient on time
- Inform patients about room cleaning times and procedures
- Inform patients about food (??)

B. Within the Department

- Inform others about the necessity of special care for the patients

Operation Theatre department Communication

A. With the Patient

- Explain procedure that is to be done
- Answer concerns of the patient about surgery
- Explain and claim responsibility in the case of a complication
- Maintain a calm voice in case of operative complication
- If necessary, ask patient about personal history of disease, etc
- Address any fears or pains of the patient during surgery

B. Within the Department

- Understand which eye is being operated on
- Communicate with the assisting nurses about necessary tools
- Inform surgeons if any problems or complications are observed.
- Assist new surgeons in training
- Inform nurses about any necessary extra post-operative care

Housekeeping Department Communication

A. with the Patients

- Understand hygienic needs of the patient
- Attend to complaints made by the patients concerning cleanliness of areas of the hospital
- Attend to general maintenance complaints made by the patients/staff (e.g. plumbing, electrical, and carpentry issues)
- Clear patients and others in hospital from areas where cleaning is taking place

B. Within the department

- Understand the hierarchy of department to direct questions
- Inform others of location during duty hours
- Notify appropriate personnel if stated directions are not clear
- Attend weekly/monthly organizational meetings
- Address issues reported by supervisors
- Educate trainees about techniques and duties
- Allocate duties to suitable workers
- Help maintain interdepartmental communication in the hospital
- Properly assess the needs of events including preparatory and post-event cleaning and organizing.

Optical Sales Department Communication

A. With the Patients

- Distinguish between male and female frames
- Understand that basic lifestyle and habits of the patient
- Know the economic limits of the patient
- Discuss different types of frames suitable based on prescription
- Know all of the products offered by the department
- Know the general prescription process
- Be aware of personal accountability of the delivered product

B. Within the Department

- Be aware of the patient flow
- Transfer information from optical sales to appropriate places
- Discuss concerns of patient with appropriate sector
- Impart necessary advice to trainees or fellow workers

All these communication formats are common to most of the areas and all of them should have scope on both in patient perspective as well department perspective.