

**Book:** *Resolving Patient Complaints: A Step-by-Step Guide to Effective Service Recovery, Second Edition*

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### **Book Review:**

The author introduces the reader to *Resolving Patient Complaints* by stating that we all have at least one customer service nightmare we are eager to share with companions. It doesn't matter if the incident occurred ten years ago; the memory and the emotions are as fresh as if it happened yesterday. The author divides the book into eight chapters covering areas that include "dealing with difficult patients" to "why patient complaints are important." The book also contains seven appendixes that outline "service recovery protocols" for patient complaints. The introduction states that even in a perfect world problems occur. Even the companies so highly touted as icons of exemplary service have some dissatisfied customers. Poor service takes place in retail, in hospitality, and in other service industries, and it happens in health care.

Excellent customer service skills are important. But sometimes "smile training" is not enough. Sometimes the patient leaves dissatisfied with the service received. If staffs do not consider resolving patient complaints to be part of their job, or do not have confidence in their own problem-solving skills, or do not have authority to handle a problem, then most likely the patient will leave even angrier than before. The preceding statement is one of the most important in the book. Staff should not just be able to "shift" the problem to the patient representative or patient advocate to solving. Everyone on staff must be skilled to resolve patient complaints. To keep the problem from becoming a customer-service nightmare in the eyes of patients, the staff need to know how to respond to a patient's dissatisfaction appropriately and effectively. This is an additional skill not usually included in customer-service training programs. The military health system as well must be cognizant of these tools and training as well as civilian organizations. Patients enter the military healthcare system with a perception of quality and standard of care that mostly mirror their civilian counterparts.

The author provides a process for patient-oriented complaint-handling, or "Services Recovery", that can be used by all staff. It illustrates how to identify common patient complaints about service in an office, clinic, or health care system, as well as how to involve all employees in developing fast, fair fixes to those complaints. Although this book has a managed care focus, the basic principles can be applied in any healthcare setting – solo practice, large-group practice, hospital, home health or long-term care facility – just these principles are already being applied in a wide variety of other service industries. The organization and staff should be trained identifying complaints and problems that are common.

The books states that common complaints should be systematically categorized, so that these problems can be minimized in the future. This process works well for responding to the vast majority of the concerns patients bring to the staff. The staff feels comfortable dealing with the situations because they have been given responsibility for resolving the problem, the skills to it well, and the information they need to do so. The author asks why these tools and processes important. Because the relationship has changed between the patient/customer and the provider. The physician no longer practices with total autonomy an control. Insurance company benefits managers review services provided by all types of practitioners and determine what will be paid for and what will be excluded from coverage. More and

more patients are locked into some kind of managed care program, whether it is staff model, a preferred provider network, a primary care network, or some other type of alliance. The patient/customer has a contractual relationship with the "Plan" to receive care and services. The author says this means the provider must work with the patient/customer – even if that person is sometimes unreasonable or difficult. Often these events cause the patients and organization objectives to be diametrically opposed.

The competing interest of patients and healthcare organization may result in patients who are "difficult" as a result of frustration at not receiving care or services. The author states most patients now have access to tremendous amounts of information from Internet and various publications, and they intend to participate actively in their healthcare. When they do not receive the care or service they think they should, or when there is a breakdown in communication, patients may feel they are being held captive. With evolving accreditation standards, grievance-resolution processes may need to be formalized throughout the Plan, facility, or system. Currently, most clinics and small group practices have informal arrangements among the staff to handle patient complaint. These informal methods may not meet patients' needs, and regrettably staff sometime prefers that angry patients leave the practice because they are too much trouble.

The basic principles outlined in this book are applicable to all organizations, from practitioner offices to multihospital/clinic systems. How those principles are formalized and implemented depends on the organization. There is no single way to respond to patient complaints. Many of the processes described in this book were used successfully for over 15 years by a large HMO. These procedures are one suggestion of how to approach patient complaints. You the reader, should take these ideas and modify them to meet the needs of your organization and staff.