

Book: Patient Satisfaction: Defining, Measuring, and Improving the Experience of Care

Author: Irwin Press, PhD

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Book Review

“That any sane nation, having observed that you could provide for the supply of bread by giving bakers a pecuniary interest in baking for you, should go on to give a surgeon a pecuniary interest in cutting off your leg, is enough to make one despair of political humanity. I do not know a single thoughtful and well-informed person who does not feel that the tragedy of illness at present is that it delivers you helplessly into the hands of a profession which you deeply mistrust.”

-George Bernard Shaw, 1911

Shaw’s pessimism may or may not have been typical for his day, but his strident tone suggests the likelihood of an unsatisfactory encounter with the medical profession. Are things getting better? In 1998, roughly 3,700 senior health care executives responded to an American Hospital Association survey that asked, “What’s on Your To-Do List to Move Your Organization Ahead?” Among 11 items, technology, forming provider networks, and providing new services topped the list. What didn’t make the list? Patient satisfaction.

Dr. Press clearly and pragmatically makes the case for patient satisfaction. Health care organizations are operating in an extremely competitive environment, and patient satisfaction has become key to gaining and maintaining market share. Thus, measuring the satisfaction of one’s patients is indeed a long-term strategic tool, not just a short-term fix. High levels of satisfied patients can lead to increased market share, which leads to increased revenue, which leads to a stronger bottom line. For 2000 years medicine was an art, for 200 years a science, and for the last twenty years it’s been a business. Successful organizations now recognize patient satisfaction as a core operating strategy.

Furthermore, patient satisfaction has become an integral component of the measurement of health care quality, and the multidimensions of that satisfaction are at the fore of today’s consumerism. It is commonly acknowledged that patients’ reports of their satisfaction with the quality of care and services are as important as many clinical health measures. In the patients’ minds perception is reality, and patient satisfaction is a valid outcome indicator of the quality of the totality of care experienced. The combination of technical excellence and premier service is inseparable; one without the other is insufficient. Providing patient-centered care is an accepted goal in medicine today. Focusing on the patient has drawn attention to the importance of the interpersonal aspects of care, such as communication between the health care provider and patient. Patient-centeredness means *understanding* the patient, including what Dr. Press calls his “explanatory model” (an awareness of and sensitivity to the evolution of an illness). Creating and strengthening the bond of trust between the health care institution and its patients is vital for a healthy and honest exchange of information (and concomitant issues of compliance and improved outcomes). One must ask how can we be a successful institution if we don’t attend to the direct consequences of patient experience?

Not only does Dr. Press provide the convincing rationale for measuring patient satisfaction he also offers tools on how to do it. He distills the weight and complexity of research methodology into theatrical simplicity. The book walks the reader through mail-back versus telephone surveys; sampling and response rates; the use of the “fishbone” or Ishikawa diagram to examine cause-and-effect; correlation coefficient and scores and weighting each. Some may find the discussion mildly technical but to understand it is to avert the potential for significant negative impact on patients’ experiences. The reader is then counseled on setting goals for patient satisfaction and devising a plan of action for achieving those goals. As Dr. Press notes, “Measurement ain’t management.”

Dr. Press makes liberal use of “front-line” examples to illustrate points he makes throughout the book, and he concludes each chapter with bulleted action steps and thorough references. This book provides the kind of valuable information to institutions that others are already paying for; it’s a steal.

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