Treating Patients as Customers—Whom Does it Help?

October 2015 marked the third year since 30% of the Medicare/Medicaid withhold was based on “customer satisfaction.” To get the money back, hospitals must get a near perfect score based on patient surveys of the patient’s experience, including things like ambience, timeliness of response to their demands (I mean needs) and the people who came in contact with them, including nurses and physicians. But does treating patients as “consumers” to be “satisfied” make a difference? And what do those scores mean?

Now, in the spirit of transparency, I must admit I never got that perfect score. And for those patients who complain, I do try to see if their complaints are valid (eg. I spend too much time looking at my computer instead of the patient). But then again, what am I to make of a report when only 11 reply out of almost 900 patients I have seen over a 3-month period?

According to studies, the most satisfied patients are the ones that cost the most. They spend more on drugs. They also are more likely to die.1 Among vulnerable adults, they have received better communication, but that did not correspond to the technical quality of their care.2 It could be hoped that more satisfied patients are more compliant patients. But that is not the case, either. Instead, adherence is more related to patient demographics.3 And, let’s face it, patients don’t always like what we have to tell them—that antibiotics don’t work for viral infections, that they are obese, shouldn’t smoke cigarettes, or should try other ways of relieving pain instead of taking narcotics—and keep telling them every time they come in. Sometimes we have to break the news that they or a loved one are going to die.

But patients are not customers. After all, when is the last time you saw a fast food restaurant refuse to serve an obese patient a double quarter-pound burger with bacon and cheese, large order of fries and 32-ounce soda on the grounds that it isn’t good for his or her health? Or


LETTER TO THE EDITOR

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