



Five Star Service

Excellence in GI

By James W. Saxton, Esquire

The lines have crossed in a historic fashion significantly increasing the importance of classic service excellence or enhancing the patient experience. It has long been a subject of research and studies showing that the better the patient experience the less likelihood of a medical professional liability claim. If anything, the relationship between the two has been undervalued! What is now coming into clearer focus is the correlation between high scores in the patient experience arena and positive economic consequences to a practice, particularly as value-based reimbursement becomes more dominant. Whether it is Medicare or commercial payors, there is a significant trend to move from payment for volume to value, and it appears to be taking place at an even quicker pace.¹

It has also been shown that the stronger the patient experience, the less bad debt a practice incurs. This relationship is becoming more important as copays and deductibles continue to climb. These patient experience scores could drive invitations to narrow networks, Accountable Care Organizations or virtual clinically integrated networks which are growing around the country. There is no doubt these "scores" will be public and can drive referrals. Many health policy experts have concluded that patient experience scores



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will soon become a necessary part of doing business in healthcare. This is a concept whose time has come and the fact that it both reduces the potential of a professional liability claim and positively impacts economics is pretty powerful.

The related issue, which has been less discussed but is equally important, is that of GI patient engagement. Patient engagement is a key concept and although related to patient satisfaction, is very different. Engaged patients are actually a cornerstone of the new healthcare delivery environment. When patients are better engaged they are more likely to understand their instructions. Engaged patients have been shown to have better outcomes in part because compliance is enhanced. True patient engagement involves making the patient, and at times, the family, as responsible as they truly are or should be. It has profound patient satisfaction implications and actually very significant positive liability implications. Clearly, increasing engagement is in keeping with our theme of being able to enhance your economics while concurrently reducing your liability exposure.

Once the goal of enhancing the patient experience is accepted, the question turns to how to assure survey scores will be ones you are both proud of and happy to share.

A couple of early steps. One needs to take the time to examine the culture of their practice and determine if you are truly focused on creating a 5 Star GI experience. Is the first impression what you want it to be? Are patients greeted with the right tone and body language? Have the staff and physicians received some basic communication training? Are the leaders of the practice "champions" of the concept? Are bonuses paid in part based on accomplishing good scores? Is it part of the orientation process and yearly evaluation? As part of this process, also look at some very specific points of patient and family contact. Consider:

- Greetings both on the phone, web, as well as when one first enters the practice.
- The way patients are "called to their visit. Are they called out or invited?
- The interaction with the assistant and nurse
- The all-important visit with the doctor. Is it on time? Does he or she give undivided attention? Does the EMR get in the way of the communication between the doctor and patient. Is there time for questions? Body language of the doctor... rushed or calm?
- Is there documented shared decision making, critical in this new high deductible environment.

- Has the patient acknowledged understanding of instructions and is it well documented?
- Have you used a GI specific informed consent, again documenting engagement?
- When there are patient complaints (always happens no matter how hard we work), is there a process to diffuse and do a “service recovery”?
- Is there a process to handle staff complaints? 5 Star needs to be internal as well as external. Staff has difficulty delivering 5 Star when they are not treated that way.

Next, this will not happen in a serious fashion unless one measures the patient experience. It is best to use a scientifically created GI patient experience survey tool. Homemade surveys are discouraged because poorly created questions that lack statistical support can be misleading. Use a GI specific survey tool, since when an overly generic patient survey is used, the results you get are less valuable. Make sure your survey tool yields strong responses, meaning a high percentage of patients respond. The one I am familiar with obtains returns in the 35% range so that there is no doubt that there is statistical relevance.² You want it to be simple for patients to use and verify the questions have been scientifically created with help from a psychometrician. (Yes, there is real science on how these surveys are created!) Make sure you are getting results real time, not months down the road, and that you have comparable statistics.

Then use the survey results as a management tool for all your providers and staff. This is powerful information which allows you to focus on where improvement is needed. There is nothing more frustrating (for your providers or staff) to be “fixed” in areas where there is no corresponding need. Time is too valuable. Knowing who you need to help and in what areas, allows you to focus your efforts on where it counts. You will begin to see trends. Is it the phone system which needs attention? Does the front desk need training? How did your doctors do in the engagement area? Are instructions understood? Seeing how doctors compare to not only each other but their peers is powerful. You have the ability to now determine what your educational programs need to address. It allows you to compare sites and move to best practices. What is office A doing compared to B? Why are their scores consistently better? These scores can also be used to protect you and your practice from other low-yield, web-based measuring organizations. This will be a scientifically valid score you can use.

Now it gets interesting. We have seen groups use this data to negotiate higher reimbursement, to market more effectively, to obtain new referral sources. This type of data is exactly

what will be needed as the value-based world becomes a bigger reality. Health policy experts consistently stress that Medicare is phasing out fee-for-service and replacing it with value-based contracts. The commercial insurers will follow. Narrow and ultra-narrow networks are being formed. Having strong patient experience and patient engagement scores will be key to keeping you in the game. On-going measurement is critical. Obtaining a baseline but then looking at their scores and using the data to focus on continued improvement is critical to your on-going success. Payors have told us that finding practices (GI practices) that are willing to measure and use results to improve are the practices they want in their network! The results will also create an environment your patients will appreciate, talk about and score highly. It’s an environment your staff will value and retention of the employees will increase as well.

Conclusion

There is little doubt that the environment is going to continue to change. Some may think this is just another trend which will reverse itself over time. However, these changes are fairly organic and all sides of the political spectrum are agreeing that the way healthcare is both paid for and delivered has to change. The safe bet is to be proactive. Enhancing patient satisfaction and engagement in a GI practice has multiple advantages. Really, for the first time in history, the lines have crossed. You can incorporate certain pragmatic changes and both reduce your liability risk and enhance your economics. As with any change, the key is to take it on seriously. Make it consistent and persuasive — meaning all the time by everyone. This is why measurement is so important. Put this on your next agenda; it’s time to get serious about the “patient experience” in your practice. 

References

1. See for example: Radnofsky, L. (2016, March 3). Obama Administration Hits Medicare Payment Target Early: Shift in the Way Payments Are Made Emphasizes Quality of Care over Quantity. Wall Street Journal. Retrieved from <http://www.wsj.com/articles/obama-administration-hits-medicare-payment-target-early-1457040340>
2. See generally SE Healthcare Patient Experience Platform at <http://www.sehealthcarequalityconsulting.com/physician-empowerment-suite/the-patient-experience-platform/>

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