Reflections on the Ideal Patient Experience

The concept of the ideal patient experience is one that has been discussed a great deal in healthcare circles in recent years. At The Scarborough Hospital, it has been embedded in our Mission, Vision and Values, with the new mission committing the organization to providing an “outstanding care experience that meets the unique needs of each and every patient.”

But what exactly is an outstanding care experience? A literature search reveals that there is no common definition of the “ideal patient experience” – in some instances, it refers to the quality of care, in others it refers to access and the journey through the system, while others suggest it is the sum total of the patients’ experiences – from arriving in the parking lot to leaving after discharge.

As The Scarborough Hospital’s Mission, Vision and Values were developed through an extensive consultation process with some 1,400 stakeholders, we decided to continue that tradition as we further refined our concept and understanding of the ideal patient experience.

To do this, we consulted with patients and those who had experience with The Scarborough Hospital (as friends and family members of patients), to help us define the elements that would create an ideal patient experience. This was done through a series of face-to-face meetings, a patient mapping study, focus groups and various on-line surveys. In all, a total of 2,885 respondents provided input into this process.*1

In an effort to be as broad and inclusive as possible, multiple methodologies were used with a range of reliabilities. The patient mapping study, for example, involved on-site interviews with patients and family members which were taped for educational purposes. Their validity is unquestionable, although the small sample size makes the results statically unreliable. Half of the participants in the patient mapping study did not speak English or spoke very little English, providing us with a unique perspective into their experiences. Not surprisingly, communications arose as a critical issue for this group. Communications did not arise as an issue throughout the rest of the process; however, when probed, participants often dropped communications and being kept informed into the “friendly, courteous and respectful service” bucket or the “involving patients in the care plan” category.

The in-person focus groups and face-to-face meetings (105 participants) can also be considered reasonably reliable. On-line surveys, however, can be completed by anyone, including those who have never been patients at The Scarborough Hospital. Over 2,500 people responded to our micro surveys on

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*1 These may not be 2,885 unique participants. Because multiple methodologies were used, it was possible for people to participate more than once.
the front page of the TSH website, while 212 people took the time to fill out the longer version of the patient experience survey.

Rather than seek results that were statistically unassailable, we instead used the process to tease out common themes – top-of-mind elements that contributed to the patient experience. We looked for consensus across the multiple methodologies.

The elements listed as possible components in an “ideal patient experience” in the survey were developed during the focus groups and face-to-face meetings. At each meeting, participants had the opportunity to add new elements to the list or vote on the ones they felt were critical. Participants were asked to select four elements that they considered the most important when providing an “ideal patient experience.” This concept of picking four was consistent throughout the process.

Allowing participants to choose the elements that make up the ideal patient experience had advantages and disadvantages. The advantage was that patients and family members could choose elements that really resonated with them. The disadvantage was that a number of elements whose meaning is unclear were added to the mix. A prime example is the “all caregivers realize that the patient’s time is as important as their own” which is really a combination of two themes – courtesy and wait times.

**Key Findings and Themes**

1. Patients have confidence in the quality of care at The Scarborough Hospital.
2. Patients would like staff members to provide service that is friendly, courteous and respectful. This is not always their experience.
3. How long patients wait for services is a critical issue that impacts the quality of the patient experience.
4. Involving patients in the care plan is a key element, although the involvement they are seeking is generally at the inform level – they want to know what their options are, what the various steps are in the process and how long they are likely to wait.
5. The right technology is considered an important element of the care experience. This is not surprising given that this is the key message of most hospital fundraising campaigns.
6. The patient experience appears to be improving. When asked to describe their most recent experience at TSH, 42% described it as excellent. When asked to reflect on experiences in the past, only 29% described them as excellent.
Results Summary

These are the results from the on-line survey; they are consistent with and supported by the face-to-face work done through focus groups, town halls and other meetings.

It is interesting to note that 76% of all respondents identified respectful services as a key element of an ideal patient experience, yet 38% said that TSH had mastered “great staff and physicians” suggesting that their experiences were not consistent – in other words, some staff members were delivering friendly, respectful service, while others were not.

The following chart again highlights the critical importance of wait times, with 51.5% identifying it as something the hospital should be working on. It is unclear if the 18.1% who identified “quality of care” did so because they think this is the most important thing, or because they think there is an issue.
Great staff and physicians come out on top as an element that TSH has mastered for the majority of respondents. Seventeen percent could not (or would not) identify an element TSH has mastered, indicating a fairly high degree of dissatisfaction in that small group.
Micro Poll Results

What is the single most influential factor that causes you to choose The Scarborough Hospital?
This is a question designed to measure commitment to the organization – are people consciously choosing TSH or are they just showing up because it’s convenient? Data suggests that the majority come here because of the quality of the care and the staff, not convenience. (Poll ran July 5 - August 23.)

Quality of Care: 550 (39%)
Caring staff/physicians: 374 (27%)
Family Doctor Referral: 249 (18%)
Location – close to home or work: 231 (16%)

If you had to choose only one thing from the following list that the hospital should work on improving, what would it be?
This is a question designed to identify non-clinical elements of the patient experience that may require work. (Poll ran August 23 – October 3.)

Overall appearance of the facilities: 409 (36%)
Parking Rates: 390 (34%)
Patient Food: 281 (25%)
Comfortable Waiting Rooms: 66 (6%)