

sounding board

PATIENT VS. CUSTOMER, THE CHANGING PARADIGM OF MODERN MEDICINE

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When I was in medical school I trained to evaluate and treat patients. People would go to the doctor with symptoms, for a check-up or for some other concern and hence become a patient under the care of their physician. Their physician would listen to them, examine them, interact with them, and then working with the patient would come up with a plan to evaluate and treat them. The goal of medicine was to maximize the quantity and quality of our patient's lives, working with them to strike the best balance achievable.

My hospital administrator tells me that I now see customers in my emergency department, and customer satisfaction is a key component of what I do. I still see and interact with people in order to alleviate their suffering, diagnose their conditions, and to work with them to come up with an evaluation and treatment plan. But something has changed. My patients are now my customers, and I am part of a service industry, and not just a doctor caring for my patients.

I think there have been some negative consequences of this change.

As a customer many patients feel they are entitled to immediate 'service' for anything that comes to mind. For example, I have had a patient scream at one of my nurses "why did I have to wait 2 #@\$*! hours to have the wax cleaned from my ears; it only takes a few minutes to do." When did it become okay to curse at the ED staff? Or consider the alcoholic that comes in almost every night to 'sleep it off' refusing to leave because "I didn't get my sandwich"—that the last one was given to the hypoglycemic patient with an insulin reaction is not important, because he feels he is entitled to his sandwich. Although most people are pretty reasonable about our prioritizing acuity in the ED, some people are annoyed that their non-urgent problems are put on hold while true emergencies are attended to — aren't they a valued customer?

Furthermore, since patients are now customers, we seem to have absolved them of much of the responsibility for caring for themselves—after all they are the customer, and it is our job to provide the service of taking care of them. For example, patients too often do not know the name of their medications or even their diagnoses—that is the doctor's job. Yet it is easy to see that for a patient coming in at 3 AM with an acute MI who usually gets all their care at the VA center and not at the hospital they present to, that the delay in the ED trying to get this information can lead to worsening clinical outcomes.

It also means that certain things necessary for patient care may become an issue. The couple of hours wait for a CAT scan, or having to drink 'that stuff again' is too inconvenient to do—couldn't they come back after they walk their dog?

I will not even mention the patient coming in demanding a refill for 100 Percocets because they ran out—this is probably a good idea for a future Sounding Board.

I think that the change from patient to customer has undermined the way patients view their physicians. I am not suggesting we go back to the physician on a pedestal model, but I think the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction. This issue only comes up in a fraction of patient encounters, but it seems that this fraction is larger than it should be, and that it is growing. That this has negative consequences for patient care and clinical outcomes makes it an issue we need to address.

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