

Seven Traits of Outstanding Physicians as Reported by Their Patients

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Introduction

U.S. doctors are generally rated highly by patients, but some are rated higher than others and may qualitatively differ in how they relate to patients and provide care that meets patient's needs or expectations. Patient ratings of healthcare quality may reflect various expectations or needs such as their health status (Marshall, Hays, and Rand 1996; Rao et al. 2004), age, gender (Hall and Dornan 1990; O'Malley, Forrest, and O'Malley 2000), family issues, and financial responsibility (Price, Desmond and Losh 1991), and more generally the ability to get timely and thorough care. Although patient satisfaction is routinely measured using multi-item surveys, few studies have sought to describe the rich array of physician practices and styles that patients deem as excellent or outstanding. Simply knowing a physician's average patient satisfaction score does not tell us much about the specific qualities that patients note and value. Wensing et al (1998) has found that studies of patient priorities for care are often narrowly focused, and limited in range of topics explored. The present study was conducted to describe the qualities of medical care that patients' value the most, using information from open comments provided by patients describing their high satisfaction with their health care or doctor.

The present study was conducted to describe the qualities of primary care that patient's value based upon structured comments provided by patients to describe their experiences with health care. The following report is a profile of patient-reported excellence in medicine.

Methods

Qualitative data on patient satisfaction and preferences for health care were obtained from structured comment fields provided by respondents who completed an online patient satisfaction survey at DrScore.com. Dr Score.com is a free, publicly available patient satisfaction website that collects anonymous patient ratings of U.S. primary care physicians. The survey asked patients to both rate their physician on several dimensions of health care experiences, as well as provide specific comments about aspects of care that were most excellent and that could be improved. Of 5,030 completed surveys, some 2,917 (58%) respondents had provided comments relating to their health care experiences with the rated doctor or practice.

These comments were downloaded and reviewed using qualitative analysis, for significant remarks that identified distinct dimensions of health care processes, content, and interactions experienced by patients. Following Miles and Huberman's (1994) framework for qualitative analyses, we developed, a priori, a general set of descriptive "domains" based on the study's research questions (e.g., patient views of excellent healthcare). These broad domains were then refined as specific "sub-domains" during the review to better capture the variability and nuances in participants' responses. Operational definitions were formulated for each domain or theme and assigned specific numeric codes. This coding schema was entered into the "NVivo" qualitative software program, which was used to assist with data management. The open-ended

comments were coded using this initial schema. Further refinements and modifications were made to the thematic structure as the data was coded.

Results

A total of 24 nodes or specific traits were identified from the coding of the patient comments and are presented in Table 1. The uncoded content was either not related to a health care issue, did not contain a meaningful unit of information, or related to a health care experience but did not appear frequent enough to form a category. Among the 24 nodes, seven thematic clusters, or domains, of excellent health care were identified as shown in Table 1. The seven domains of health care quality valued by patients included excellence in: 1) access to physician or health care services; 2) communication with and by provider; 3) personality and demeanor of provider, such as being supportive, caring, and compassionate; 4) quality of medical care processes such as diagnosis and treatment; 5) care continuity involved in following up on health care issues or concerns, making referrals and discussing test results; 6) quality of the healthcare facilities; and 7) office staff. Representative quotations (edited for brevity and clarity) for each theme were selected and are presented below to more fully depict the relevant issues and experiences.

Quality 1: Outstanding Access: General qualities of excellence in access to healthcare valued by patients in this category is the ability to see the doctor on a relatively short notice, short wait times and to have telephone calls returned quickly and reliably.

Appointments.

“It is easy to get an appointment with her”

“I can easily get same day appointments”

Waiting times.

“He keeps appointments on time or very close”

“Always timely”

Telephone. Patients may seek advice or clarifications regarding their healthcare or treatment over the phone, and recognized their doctor’s excellence in being responsive to telephone calls and use of the telephone to personally check on how their patients are doing.

“Extremely responsive to patient calls.”

‘She will personally call you at home with test results.’

“I can call him anytime.”

“We have phone visits in between <office> visits to discuss things I need.”

Quality 2: Outstanding Communication Skills. This category received the second largest volume of comments pertaining to excellence in health care. Patients distinguished 4 key areas of communication that defined high quality care, summarized as “personal attention” given by the provider.

Listening. Patients value providers who are excellent listeners, and who take patients concerns seriously. These qualities convey truly caring about the patient and giving attention to the patient’s concerns and their family members. Many patients have had previous providers that they felt did not listen to them and could contrast the difference in care when listening was attentive:

“He truly listens and does not shrug off what you are feeling”

“Having problems for a long time, every other doctor I visited would say ‘this is normal.’ It was not normal and Dr. <name> really listened to what I was saying...was very attentive and caring. I wish I would have found him years ago.”

“He encourages patients as well as their family members to ask questions”

“She always seems to have time to listen and give me her full attention”

“He seems to really care about what I have to say.”

Patient as partner. Another quality of excellence is when a doctor instills a sense of partnership with the patient by using attentive listening of patient concerns or values to adjust and individualize treatment, and encourages patients to openly discuss their concerns.

“He allows the patient to be an active participant in health care decision-making.”

“A partner in your health”

“I really like having a voice in my recovery”

“You can open up to him”

Giving information. Much information, often technical in nature, is exchanged in a clinical care encounter and providers who do this well in a manner that the patient can understand, are highly praised by their patients as being approachable and easy to talk to. However, the method and delivery of the communication are also admired qualities. These include being soft spoken and direct, getting the providers honest opinion in a warm conversational style.

“Very easy to approach and communicate with”

“Excellent communicator”

“Plain spoken, straightforward in his approach.”

“Isn’t afraid to tell you what he thinks”

“He makes plenty of eye contact”

“Explains everything to me so that I can understand it”

Quality 3: Outstanding Personality and Demeanor. This category contains aspects of provider’s demeanor and personality that patients viewed as strengths about their health care provider. Patients view

belonging to a practice as a relationship with a provider or providers, and value sincere and warm interactions. From the patients point of view, their healthcare visit is not about a business transaction but something that is highly personal. In a sense, patients who are extremely satisfied with their care have ‘bonded’ to providers that they like and feel comfortable with, and most highly value the warm, personal qualities of their provider and distinguished five categories:

Friendliness.

“His manner is friendly, dignified, well-mannered and pleasant.”

“Excellent bedside manner”

“Very personable. Even said ‘thank you for letting me see you today!’”

“Hugs for everyone, always smiling, you never want to leave her office!”

Humaneness and caring. This is a quality of clear outward expression by the provider that he/she really cares about the patient to the level of being perceived as sincere and compassionate about the patients needs, as a whole person, and about their family.

“Has a sincere interest in his patients”

“I appreciate his warm, caring, friendly manner”

“Cares about you as a person”

“Showed interest in the whole patient.”

“She is very compassionate”

Supportive and Understanding. This quality includes having patience, consideration, and showing empathy by taking the patients interests first, and striving to support the patient’s choices for treatment.

“Very understanding”

“He gives the impression that whatever your personal situation, he’ll try to work with you.”

“He has the ability to make me extremely comfortable and at ease in his office.”

“Made me feel secure about my decisions.”

“During the exam he did his best to cause as little pain as possible”

“Makes patients feel like more than just a number on paper.”

Trust. Patients entrust their health and welfare to the guidance of physicians. Trust is an essential quality of excellence in health care and summarizes that the provider is sincere, and takes the patients interest first, and is very knowledgeable.

“I feel very safe with Dr. <name> “

“Even though he was giving me the worst possible news a mother could hear, he made me feel confident that my daughter was getting the best care possible.”

“If Dr. <name> says it I would do it.”

“I trust his judgment”

“Very personal and interested. I trust him.’

Family/ Child. Another quality of provider excellence offered by patients is the appropriate inclusion of family members in health concerns, taking a family focused view, and competent with adults and children.

“Always has a concern on how your family is doing”

“Very attentive to both parent and child”

“He lets you know that he cares about the whole family by working hard to know everyone personally.”

Quality 4: Outstanding Medical Care.

Getting excellent medical care is high valued and consists of a complex of qualities, including patient advocacy, and technical competence such as diagnoses/ treatment approach and options, and thoroughness, amount of time spent with patient, and use of medications.

Patient Advocacy. This is essentially the extent that patients perceive that the doctor has a patient's interest first, and promotes this interest to others.

“He will go to bat with the insurance company if they deny medication.”

“He connects patients with the appropriate advocacy resource”

“Willing to fight to for her patients needs”

Technical Competence. Of all categories, comments on a doctor's excellence in competence were the most numerous type of praise offered by patients. This result underscores that patients attend an office visit or chosen a provider for a procedure or facet of health care management, and having a skilled practitioner is crucial. Competence is viewed or defined by patients includes facets of treatment approach and outcomes.

“Very knowledgeable of all the latest treatment.”

“He is an excellent diagnostician”

“I can finally get up and feel like a real person again.”

Thorough. Patients place high value on receiving careful attention from their physician, and not feeling rushed through their visit. By taking time, patients feel listened to and receive thorough care.

“He talks to you and does not give you the rush treatment”

“Even if his waiting room is at capacity, he takes his time with you and makes sure that you leave his office with a sense of satisfaction.”

“He takes time and listens”

“Very thorough”

“She is extremely thorough and conscientious. She always takes her time.”

Medications and Alternative Treatment. Contrary to the popular impression that patients need and seek medicine from their visit, patients who praised their physicians valued cautious use of medicine, being informative about the medications, lowering medication costs, following up to see that the medicine is safe and effective, and making it easy to get refills.

“He is not a pill-pusher”

“She does not over-prescribe antibiotics or other medications”

“Only prescribes medicine when necessary”

“He has worked with me to lower my medication costs”

“Explains good and bad points of medicine”

“If you don’t have a good prescription plan, he has plenty of samples”

For alternative treatments, patients valued that their physician was willing to “think outside the box” and “treat the whole person.” “He is willing to entertain options of alternative treatments and has helped us research nutritional supplements.”

Quality 5: Outstanding Follow-up, Referrals and Care Continuity. While patient visits are discrete units, from the patient’s viewpoint, he/she values a continuous relationship with a practice and provider, and value continuity of care. This supports the patients need to seek problem resolution, treatment tailoring, and self-care management. Patients value providers who monitor and follow the path of care forward, referrals and the opportunity to seek second opinions when needed, and monitoring of their health conditions.

“He checks up on a regular basis if you’ve not been doing well”

“If he is doubtful about his decision, he asks for a second opinion. I admire that.”

“He follows through with everything”

“Very good about follow-up with other doctors involved.”

Quality 6: Outstanding Office Staff. Having great office staff adds to the total positive experience that patients encounter in a practice. Qualities such as being professional, friendly, and helpful were offered as exemplary of highly rated practices. These comments were volunteered by patients:

“Her office staff are excellent and return and answer calls.”

“Very well run office”

“In addition his support staff is the best!”

“Staff makes you feel welcome”

Quality 7: Outstanding Facilities. In the final quality of excellent health care, patients appreciate being treated in a convenient, clean, well-organized and modern facility. Amenities are extras and show that the practice can take the patient’s perspective by making providing a favorable physical environment. “Dr. <name> has the nicest office environment I have ever seen. His waiting area and exam room have a comfortable atmosphere – makes you feel that you’re right at home. I was blown away at my first office visit when his staff offered me a choice of flavored water while I was waiting in the exam room.”

Discussion

The qualitative content in this study revealed that patients perceive and value at least 7 domains of healthcare in defining outstanding quality. Within each domain were content categories that further revealed the range of issues that matter. By reviewing these results, we can gain a profile of the excellent doctor from the patient’s point-of-view. Perhaps the results are not all that startling if we reflect upon our own experience with care. Patients value providers who take time to listen to them, to work with the

patient, to support the patient in managing their healthcare, and who make an effort to personalize patient care. Providers who work hard on the patient's behalf are highly thought of, and build the solid trust of their patients. These results also underscore the complexity of providing excellent healthcare. Patients want to be informed, to be treated conservatively, to have help navigating the myriad of options and services that are available, and to get effective care.

Much of the content that appears here is focused on communication and interpersonal style, which generated more response content than more objective categories such as wait items and facility. However, U.S. physicians are trained primarily in the biomedical model. In addition to 4 years of college, physicians will typically complete 4 years of medical school, and 3-7 years (or more) of residency training. This is followed by a lifelong commitment to continuing medical education. It is not surprising that the quality of physicians' technical skills are generally outstanding. Nevertheless, while patients value technical expertise, their overall healthcare experience is driven largely by other factors. Healthcare consumers perceive excellence in healthcare largely as they do excellence in other consumer areas— valuing access, clean facilities, and personal attention (Marks, et al, 2004). Thus, a practical use of these findings would be more emphasis in physician training and in continuous quality improvement efforts in developing skills that can result in clear communication, expressing empathy, and supporting patient information needs. These qualities are likely to lead to clinical benefits of more adherent patients and more empowered to achieve health promotion and disease prevention goals.

In considering the results of this study, a notable strength is the large number of patient comments that were provided and the use of a robust qualitative analysis tool that allowed us to see the emerging content clusters. It should be noted that qualitative analysis is designed to identify the core content areas and range of beliefs or attitudes associated with a topic rather than estimating the proportion of respondents with a certain view.

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Table 1. Listing of Content Nodes Describing Patient Experiences with Healthcare.

Nodes #	(Code) Label
1	(1) General Positive
2	(1 1) Access - telephone access, availability of appointments, physical access
3	(1 1 11) Access - Wait time
4	(1 2) Technical competence- including knowledge, skills, effectiveness of treatments
5	(1 3) Communication - General comments
6	(1 3 1) Communication - Listening
7	(1 3 2) Communication - Sharing decisions
8	(1 3 3) Communication - Giving information
9	(1 3 4) Communication - Phone communication
10	(1 4) Interpersonal Including bedside manner
11	(1 4 1) Interpersonal - Humanness
12	(1 4 2) Interpersonal - Caring

13	(1 4 3) Interpersonal – Supporting, including comfort
14	(1 4 4) Interpersonal -Trust
15	(1 4 5) Interpersonal – Family, respect/inclusion of family/friend(s)
16	(1 5) Patient visit
17	(1 5 1)Patient visit/Amount of time
18	(1 5 2)Patient visit/Thoroughness, including exploring patient needs
19	(1 6) Office staff
20	(1 7) Continuity of care
21	(1 8) Referrals
22	(1 9) Medications - Handling medications, prescriptions
23	(1 10) Advocacy
24	(1 11)Follow-up care

Table 2:Categories of Outstanding Health Care

	DESCRIPTION
Access <i>General</i> <i>Wait time</i> <i>Phone</i>	The ability to make an appointment, see or contact a physician or other provider in a timely manner. Includes both office visits and telephone contact.
Communication <i>General</i> <i>Listening</i> <i>Patient as partner</i> <i>Giving information</i>	The style and manner in which the provider verbally communicates to the patient; involves four distinct and essential qualities With the goal of including the patient in the health care process.

<p>Personality/demeanor</p> <p><i>General</i></p> <p><i>Humaneness</i></p> <p><i>Caring</i></p> <p><i>Support</i></p> <p><i>Trust</i></p> <p><i>Family/Children</i></p>	<p>The providers general behavior and disposition toward the patient involving six distinct traits that convey empathy and caring. This can include both verbal and non-verbal behaviors, and extends beyond the patient to include the family.</p>
<p>Medical Care</p> <p><i>Advocate</i></p> <p><i>Technical competence</i></p> <p><i>Time spent with patient</i></p> <p><i>Diagnoses</i></p> <p><i>Treatment approach</i></p> <p><i>Thoroughness</i></p> <p><i>Treatment options</i></p> <p><i>Medications</i></p>	<p>This large category includes eight aspects of medical care that patients recognize as important and value. These range from the skill level of the physician, and thoroughness of care, to the overall treatment approach of diagnosis, treating and following up on results.</p>
<p>Continuity</p> <p><i>Follow-Up</i></p> <p><i>Test results</i></p> <p><i>Referrals</i></p>	<p>This separate domain was emphasized by patients as very important and distinguishing excellent care.</p>
<p>Facilities</p>	<p>This category is narrowly defined as the look and feel of the physical location or facility of the office or clinic</p>
<p>Office Staff</p>	<p>This addressed support staff who assist the patient's access to medical care, and who may serve a critical role as a liaison between</p>

patient and doctor.
