Patient Satisfaction as Part of Quality Assurance in E-Health

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ABSTRACT

Health care is characterized by complex and interrelated processes. E-health promises to provide efficient national medical markets, service at all hours and the consistent integration of products and services. It can also be used to better patient physician relationships as web sites can be used to deliver information directly to consumers. Systematic measurement of patient satisfaction is seldom included in routine quality assurance (QA) programs. Practical reasons have been given to explain this omission: the mental and physical state of patients, their lack of the necessary scientific and technical knowledge, the rapid pace of events of care, and methodological problems related to measuring patient satisfaction. Quality medical information should be provided, which should not be marred by provider self interest. Quality assurance is of prime importance and it is necessary to make sure that, sites providing medical advice, drug manufacturers, and health insurers all associated with medicine deliver high quality services so that the consumers are satisfied. Measuring quality can also help organizations monitor their progress toward public health goals and become more accountable to both the populations they serve and policy makers.

Keywords: E-Health, Health Sector, ICT, Patient Satisfaction, Quality Assurance, Reliability

INTRODUCTION

Healthcare services have been remarkably improved by technological interventions and the new and rapidly growing field of ICTs for healthcare known as E-health has emerged (Asangansi, 2008).

E-health tools or solutions include products, systems and services that go beyond simply Internet-based applications. They include tools for health authorities and professionals as well as personalized health systems for patients and citizens. Examples include health information networks, electronic health records, telemedicine services, personal wearable and portable communicable systems, health portals, and many other information and communication technology-based tools assisting prevention, diagnosis, treatment, health monitoring, and lifestyle management. These systems can e.g., help shorten or completely avoid the stay of patients in hospitals, while ensuring monitoring of their health status.

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E-health provides access to health data that can promote healthier lifestyles and prevent disease. It can therefore contribute solutions to key challenges to the current healthcare systems by increasing the quality of life through effective illness prevention which, in turn, would reduce clinical healthcare costs.

Quality assessment and improvement are knowledge-driven enterprises. We know far more today than in the past. We still do not know enough about what works in medicine and health care, for what conditions, under what circumstances, and at what cost to improve the quality of health care to the greatest extent possible. Effectively functioning markets require that patients, employers, and other consumers have good information for decision making, including knowledge about the performance of health plans and the efficacy, effectiveness, and cost-effectiveness of health services, both new and established.

Health-services researchers, government agencies, health plans, purchaser coalitions, and others have done much to improve ways of measuring health outcomes, comparing the outcomes of different health care practices, evaluating the performance of health care providers and practitioners, and developing credible and useful guidance for patients and clinicians in making medical decisions.

**CHALLENGES AND EXPECTATIONS FACING A HEALTH SECTOR**

Throughout the world, health sectors are faced with numerous challenges and expectations that affect their healthcare systems. The following are some of the common challenges (Commission of the European Communities, 2004, p. 5):

- The increasing demand for health and social services, due to an ageing population, higher income and educational levels,
- The rise in expectations of citizens who want the best care available and reduced inequalities in access to good healthcare,
- The increasing mobility of patients and health professionals within a better functioning internal market,
- The need to reduce the ‘disease burden’, and to respond to emerging disease risks,
- The difficulties public authorities encounter in matching investment in technology with investment in the complex organizational changes needed to exploit its potential,
- The need to limit occupational accidents and diseases, to reinforce wellbeing at work and to address new forms of work-related diseases,
- The management of massive amounts of health information, which must be accessible, securely stored, available in a timely manner when needed and processed efficiently for administrative and clinical purposes,
- The need to provide the best possible health care under limited budgetary conditions.

**DIMENSIONS OF QUALITY**

Quality is a comprehensive and multifaceted concept. Experts generally recognize several distinct dimensions of quality that vary in importance depending on the context in which a QA effort takes place. QA activities may address one or more dimensions, such as technical competence, access to services, effectiveness, interpersonal relations, efficiency, continuity, safety, and amenities. These dimensions of quality are a useful framework that helps health teams to define and analyze their problems and to measure the extent to which they are meeting program standards. The eight dimensions of quality are as appropriate for clinical care as for management services that support service delivery (Figure 1).

1. **Technical Competence**: Technical competence refers to the skills, capability, and actual performance of health providers, managers, and support staff. For example, to provide technically competent services, a village health worker must have the skills...
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