

EXPRESS Healthcare

FOCUS



saying 'Atithi Devo Bhava' which means guests should be treated like God. "In the hospital industry, our guests are mainly the patient and relatives, whom we should treat like God. To achieve this, the concept of customer delight has evolved with the deployment of PRMs," says Dr Karanjekar.

The Need

Developing and nurturing a relationship with customers is essential in every industry, so healthcare is no exception, albeit the requirement to hand-hold the customer (patient) is decidedly more. It is here where the PRM comes into the picture. "Patients have come to expect personalised services and, with their busy schedules, like to spend as little time as possible at the hospital. Hence, having a relationship manager has become quite significant," states Y Subrahmanyam, GM Operations, Apollo Health City, Hyderabad.

The Personal Touch

Hospitals across India face numerous patient issues that go unsolved many a times. Patients are often left to the mercy of hospital team. Doctors do not communicate effectively to the patient or their families; patients are not told of their charges well in advance. Ambiguity in billing, lack of facilities, and lack of support in finding facilities available in the hospital- all leads to disgruntled patient relations. In this current scenario, PRM plays a major role in keeping the patients and their families happy with the hospital services. "Here comes the significance of treating customers personally as human beings. In this stressful generation, patients need someone to care and listen to. The concept of 'No Cure without Care' is depicted in the concept of PRM," opines

Treating with Delight

The concept of Patient Relationship Managers in hospitals is gaining momentum in Indian healthcare. Sonal Shukla explores the idea and its potential to evolve further in hospitals

One are the days when hospitality was a term associated with hotels. This is an era, where healthcare is becoming an ever demanding industry. Patients have become demanding not just with right to information but also the level of service offered to them. During such persistent times, there is a new breed of managers, who were virtually non-existent in earlier days, who are known as 'Patient Relationship Managers' or PRMs. The concept of having PRM, also known as guest relations

manager is now being adopted by many of the corporate hospitals in Asia and Europe.

Leading groups like Apollo, Wockhardt, Max Healthcare, AMRI, Global, LH Hiranandani and Sahara Hospital have taken an initiative to have full-time PRMs. The concept of PRM, which originated from the success-story of relationship managers in the banking industry, now seems to be gaining momentum in Indian healthcare. "It is definitely a new concept for India which has originated from the

western world. The concept is all about providing better care to the patient and increasing the overall patient satisfaction level by answering his/ her queries and attending their relatives and well wishers," states Dr HP Kumar, Director (Medical Health), Sahara Hospital. However, as far as the concept goes, Dr Ravindra Karanjekar Associate Vice President, Head - Wockhardt Hospitals begs to differ. According to Karanjekar, PRM is very much an Indian concept which has stemmed from the famous Sanskrit

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S T R A T E G Y

Duties and Responsibilities Checklist

- Provide a link between the hospital, patient and families, especially in areas of conflict resolution.
- Provide a formal mechanism for the investigation, resolution and recording of patient's complaints.
- Interpret and explain to patients/ families the policy and procedures of hospital.
- Provide information to customers about resources, both inside and outside.
- Identify and assess problems that may arise.
- Depending on the nature of complainants, handles, follow-ups, monitors and evaluates all patient complaints and suggestions.
- Prepare quality improvement yearly plan for monitoring and evaluating indicators, collecting data and co-ordinating with departmental heads.
- Act as grievance counselors.
- Champion patient rights and education.
- Maintain required records, reports, statistics etc.
- Make daily rounds on assigned area and discuss problems and complaints with patient and family.
- Co-ordinate with protocol staff when a VIP patient arrives at the clinic.
- Co-ordinate with nursing services, health education and Medical Social Worker (MSW).
- Participate in health awareness programmes.

Karanjekar.

Even to facilitate medical tourism patients, the concept of PRM is very important and many hospitals have PRMs just to cater to foreign patients.

Concept

PRMs are single point of contact for the patient during their visit/ stay in the hospital. A patient requires services from many departments (medical, nursing, F&B, housekeeping, diagnostics and physiotherapy) and the PRM ensures that all departments work together to provide the best experience to the patient. "A PRM is typically an interface between the hospital and the patient / patient's attendants," says

Dr Dilpreet Brar, Regional Director (South), Max Healthcare, New Delhi.

They are experts who are one point of contacts to patients and their family. They normally report to the marketing head in liaison to operations team of a hospital. They are available to maintain a positive relation for the patient and their families on behalf of the hospital. The PRM can answer questions about hospital policies, encourage communication between hospital departments and champion patient rights. They provide a formal mechanism for investigation, resolution and recording of patient complaints and are supposed to make recommendations to the hospital based on patient feedback.

Happy to Help You

"They can be called the watch guards of 'patient delight' in a hospital. It is their duty to receive the patients on arrival, ensure that the patient/ family has all related information with regards to their treatment," says C Sobhana, General Manager-HR, BGS Global Hospitals, Bangalore. PRMs are supposed to co-ordinate between the patient and the doctor. They also ensure that all related consents for the treatment are obtained before the patient is taken for surgery or other mode of treatment.

They go that extra mile to find services outside the hospital in terms of accommodation for family

and liaise with the relevant service areas for travel booking and related facilities. Most of these services are required by patients who come from outside the state and those who are not familiar with the region. PRM also co-ordinates insurance patients and becomes one point of contact between the TPAs and billing team of the hospital. They also ensure that infection control team works at their best to ensure patient safety. They even orient patients on the role of the unit staff and the layout of the hospital.

The team also ensures that the patients leave the hospital with utmost happiness of the service met. Creating a good experience is the main responsibility of a relationship manager. They also provide psychological and emotional support and are primarily responsible for all non-medical services. They are also required to co-ordinate all medical requirements of the patients. According to experts, the duties of the managers also change according to the different areas that they handle. Therefore, a manager looking after in-patient areas will have different duties as compared to one handling out-patient areas.

Some Case Studies

Today, most of the corporate hospitals in India have been trying to customise the concept of PRM as per their needs. Global Hospitals has trained PRM and patient co-ordinators who report to the marketing team. The team is segregated floor wise and as per the needs of the international patients. The initiative of having patient relations team was started in year 2000. Nine years of patient relations team has seen tremendous improvement in the services meted to the patients at Global Hospitals.

"There is a dedicated patient co-ordinator facilitating international patients, who are trained specifically to cater to international patients. The rationale behind this position is to meet patient demands and ensure that every patient leaves the hospital with a sense of having cared and cured at best," shares Sobhana.

Apollo Hospitals, Hyderabad have had patient relationship managers in the

hospital since its inception. Today, the hospital is hiring hospital management graduates as patient relationship managers. Subrahmanyam agrees that having PRMs in the hospital provides more time to the medical and nursing staff to concentrate on their core work rather than spending time on getting support services to the patient.

In Max Healthcare, PRMs operate at various levels as patient care co-ordinators, floor operations managers (to manage in-patients and attendants on designated floors), mentors for those undertaking the preventive healthcare programme of the hospital.

"International patients and medical value travelers have some unique requirements and to meet them we have an international patient services team. This team maps the customer requirements, in terms of boarding/ lodging, travel, interpreter, wire-transfer, shopping; and delivers accordingly," shares Dr Brar.

In Wockhardt Hospitals, Mumbai customer care officers are posted in non-medical areas to handle both Indian and foreign patients. "One of the key complaints in hospital was the lack of a personal relationship between the patient and the organisation. To be a success customer- oriented hospital, our hospital had to look at the expectations of customers. This was the rationale behind creating the post of patient relation officers," says Dr Karanjekar.

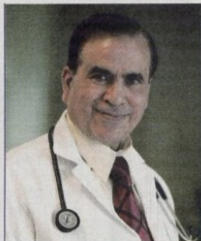
The customer care officers in the hospital looks after right from admission desk to the ward levels. In billing, the PRM acts as greeting officers, does the registration and billing process. All the clinical admission formalities are done by customer care officers. At the ward level, PRM takes daily rounds to the assigned areas and assess the patients and relative need. In ICU, they act as grievance counselors, as the relatives are in emotional mood.

AMRI Hospitals, Kolkata has tried to make the PRMs more approachable to increase the patient satisfaction level. "In our hospital at the time of admission, the patient and his family members are conveyed that in case of any requirement related with non-medical issues, they can call the floor co-ordinator till six PM. If during that period, ▶



It is the duty to receive the patients and ensure that family has all information with regards to the treatment

C Sobhana
General Manager-HR
BGS Global Hospitals
Bangalore



PRM is all about giving better care to the patient and increasing the overall patient satisfaction level

Dr HP Kumar
Director-Medical Health
Sahara Hospital
Lucknow

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Wockhardt Hospital, Mumbai has hired customer care officers



Guest Relationship Officer of Sahara Hospital, Lucknow

they feel any deficiency or any 'I don't care attitude' of any staff, they should feel free to contact the patient relationship manager at any time who will attend to the patient party immediately during routine hours and thereafter he/ she will manage to get the problem sorted out through other senior persons in the hospital like doctor on duty, nurses supervisor, night administrator," shares Dr TS Kukreja, Executive Vice President, AMRI Hospitals.

According to Dr Kukreja, this has given immense faith to patients that they are cared for and they have the option to voice their complaint/ suggestion/ requirement to someone senior who will ensure that the problem is sorted out at the earliest.

Sahara Hospital, Lucknow has made a separate team of executives who have been designated to take care of separate departments such as preventive health check-up department, OPD-floor wise, registration, billing and discharge process.

Training Trails

Training is an integral part of the upscale performance of patient relations function. Interpersonal relationship is a prime requirement of this position, feel experts. Next comes grievance handling. PRM must be well trained to handle grievance and offer solutions. They should be adept in prioritising the demands of the patients and must be trained to handle different kinds of people arriving at the hospital.

PRMs enable hospitals to keep track of services given to each patient and a feedback from the patient tells them the gaps in services meted to them. Most of the feedbacks from patients include complaints like no greeting from hospital staff, untimely service, staff did not introduce themselves, are not aware of the hospital facilities, not enough information, ambiguity in billing, and felt ignored. The whole load of complaints can be solved by an effective PRM who is well trained with the hospital policy, facility, who has the interpersonal skills and

problem solving solutions. According to Dr Akash Rajpal, AGM-Operations, DR LH Hiranandani Hospital, interdepartmental co-ordination and availability of the manager are some of the problems in making PRM an integral part of the hospital environment. However, imparting training to more staff to handle such responsibilities can be of good help. "Training related to the entire process of handling such patients is critical. Co-ordination with all concerned department like nursing/ OT/ billing/ TPA/ OPD etc is part and parcel and training. We have made specific SOPs on the said aspect," adds Dr Rajpal.

Linguists

PRMs not only need to have the knack of co-ordinating and assisting, but a crucial USP which they are supposed to have is multi-lingual skills. They should be able to speak several languages, because people soften to a staff who can talk their mother tongue. Global Hospital trains its PRMs on interpersonal management, multi-lingual skills, problem solving skills, grievance handling, complaints analysis and communication skills. They are also trained to welcome patients and offer welcome packs, how to orient patients on services available. Sahara Hospital has a Guest Relations team which comprises multi-lingual executives so that patients and guests coming from different regions of the country and abroad can have ease in communicating in their respective languages.

Challenges

Some of the challenges faced by the hospitals in relation to the PRM are hiring the right candidate. The job market has not understood this as a lucrative position in the hospital and not many candidates understand the

importance of this position. According to Sobhana, many such positions in the hospital are filled by already existing candidates in the hospital who would have been in the marketing team or in customer facilitation team. "The market is yet to understand the importance of a PRM. At Global Hospital, we conduct rigorous interview in assessing the ability of the candidates to perform patient co-ordination jobs," she adds further. The other big challenge that the hospitals are facing is integrating the medical services into the concept of PRM. "However, over time, staff and patients have come to realise the importance of having a single point of contact and we have been successful in integrating all services into one," shares Subrahmanyam.

Business Benefits

The business benefits of having PRM are numerous. First, they ensure that the patients of the hospital leave delighted with the service. Second, they follow up on patients at stipulated intervals to ensure that the treatment followed is effective for them and remind the patient of follow up dates. Third, they stand as advocates to ensure that the hospital services are up to the set standards of practice and demands service from every facility of the hospital. "Improved patient satisfaction not only increases the chances that the patient will come back for future healthcare needs, but also results in positive word-of-mouth," says Subrahmanyam. Hence, the business benefits are retention of valuable customers and new patients through word-of-mouth.

So, with the emerging concept of PRMs, a visit to the hospital is a matter of joy. ■

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PRMs make patients cared for as they have the option to voice their complaint/ suggestion

Dr TS Kukreja
Executive Vice President
AMRI Hospitals
Kolkata



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