
Personal Improvement

Why you need staff with excellent customer service skills to stay ahead of the game

By Lorena Tonarelli

Poor quality of care has long been a concern, and historically handled with fines, penalties and other sanctions.

This punitive approach, however, has failed to produce any real, long-term improvement.

So, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) has adopted a different strategy altogether.

Medicaid Pay For Performance

The agency has launched the Medicaid Nursing Home Pay-For-Performance (P4P) program, which focuses on rewarding facilities that do well, rather than just punishing underperforming ones.

Essentially, under the P4P program, Medicaid payments to nursing homes are determined by their performance on care quality measures; the better the performance, the higher the payments.

Expert in long-term care policy and administration, Dr. Greg Airling, of the Indiana University Center for Aging Research, says the rationale behind this approach is that, "if better performance is rewarded with proportionately higher payments, then, providers will strive for high-quality care."

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Poor customer satisfaction

Now, one of the best ways to evaluate a facility's performance is to look at its customer satisfaction scores.

And that's where the problems start.

A national survey of nursing homes, conducted by Harvard School of Public Health and the Kaiser Family Foundation, found that, of the interviewed residents and their family members,

- 37% were generally dissatisfied with the quality of nursing home services received.
- 32% denounced a lack of resident-appropriate recreational activities.
- 25% reported residents being physically restrained.
- 25% said residents had been "treated badly or abused by staff."
- 25% said residents "were not generally bathed and groomed in a satisfactory way."
- 24% reported staff being uninterested in family members' concerns about their loved one.
- 23% said residents they knew developed pressure ulcers.
- 21% said staff "do not provide adequate help at mealtimes."

Medicare payments affected

Poor customer satisfaction is not exclusive to nursing homes.

Assisted living facilities, hospitals, and physician clinics also have their share of unhappy patients and disgruntled family members.

And there are pay-for-performance programs for these settings, too.

Starting in October 2012, some Medicare hospital reimbursements will be partly based on patient experience scores, as mandate by the Affordable Care Act.

"For Medicare beneficiaries to get higher quality health care, our payment system needs to encourage better care," says a spokesperson for the Department of Health and Human Services.

"Paying hospitals for the quality of care they provide takes us closer to that goal."

Customer skills WANTED!

So, what does all this mean to nursing homes, hospitals and clinics across the country? It's quite simple.

In order to achieve high performance and, consequently, benefit from reimbursement programs, avoid sanctions, maintain a good reputation, and match the competition, they must keep patients/residents and their families happy.

How do they do this? By ensuring staff at all levels have excellent customer care skills.

Experience from healthcare and other industries shows these skills can be taught successfully with ongoing, comprehensive training.

They include the ability to

- develop positive relationships with family members,
- listen and respond to concerns,
- deal with difficult patients,
- handle complaints effectively,
- show empathy and sensitivity, and
- be a productive team member.



Staff-family relationships: Dos and don'ts

A top priority for improving nursing home customer satisfaction is to create a culture that emphasizes the importance of good relationships between staff and the residents' family.

“Research has shown that family members value effective relationships with nursing home staff, whom they see as a source of information and a means of remaining involved in care decisions,” explains Dr. Queen Utley-Smith, a nurse educator at Duke University.

And that is what the facility should strive to give.

Family can assist in plans

Besides, add the researchers, “family members who possess information about residents’ preferences, habits and goals of care can assist staff to establish an optimal plan of care that contributes to resident wellbeing.”

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Staff-family relationships...

Dos:

Utley-Smith and a team of colleagues have conducted a six-month study involving two long-term care facilities, which has helped identify steps nursing homes can take to promote good staff-family relationships.

Here is what these steps are:

- Make sure the residents’ family feel welcome.
Staff should always be nice and pleasant; they should show a genuine interest in how family members are coping with their loved one’s stay in the facility, and should address any concern families have.
- Encourage family members to attend care planning meetings, and to share information that may help address problems relating to the care

their loved one receives, or that could make their loved one’s stay in the home more pleasant.

- Keep family members constantly informed about their loved one’s conditions and care through a system of regular face-to-face, telephone, and written communications.

As part of this system, staff should ask if there is anything, in particular, they should do for the resident.

They should also promptly inform family members if a problem occurs.

In one of the two facilities involved in the study, this system led to happier, more satisfied family members and reduced the number of complaints, as well.

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