

# How Patients Define "Service"

BY LINDA D. BYERLY, RN

**C**urious about what hospital patients mean when they use the word "service," St. John's Mercy Medical Center (SJMMC) in St. Louis organized a series of focus groups. The information gained from the groups's discussions has influenced the hospital's performance and quality evaluation processes.

The discussions, held in May 1994, involved four 12-person focus groups. Two of these groups were composed of former SJMMC patients and their spouses. Former patients (and their spouses) of other hospitals made up the other two groups. All participants were at least 40 years of age.

In each of the four groups, the participants began by talking about healthcare in general and then moved on to a discussion of their own experiences with hospitals. In general, they said they were very pleased with the care they had received at SJMMC and ranked it among the best in St. Louis. They did recommend that the medical center continue hiring competent, compassionate staff members who make an effort to communicate about care with patients and family members.

## WHAT THE GROUPS SAID

Surprisingly, virtually none of the focus group participants had complaints about the hospitals' medical treatment or use of technology. Instead, participants tended to focus on the manner in which care was given. They consistently returned to concerns they defined as "service." These concerns seemed to fall roughly into four areas.

**Communication** Participants stressed the importance of care givers:

- Explaining to the patient why something is being done
- Making sure the patient and family fully understand such explanations
- Sincerely saying "I'm sorry" when the staff has erred in some way, instead of making excuses or blaming someone else
- Listening to the patient's concerns and following up on them



*Ms. Byerly is  
manager, marketing  
communications,  
St. John's Mercy  
Medical Center,  
St. Louis.*

- Explaining what the patient can expect both during and after a hospital stay, and why
- Explaining delays in treatment to the patient
- Expressing sincere interest in the patient's well-being

- Explaining medications to the patient

**Comfort** Participants said it was important for patients to be provided with:

- Clean, quiet rooms with comfortable temperatures
- Care and services given by professionally attired personnel
- An extra pillow or blanket, if requested
- A snack at bedtime
- Fresh water at the bedside
- Psychological comfort (e.g., reassurance, a sympathetic touch, an encouraging word)

**Courtesy** Participants emphasized the importance of having care givers who:

- Smile
- Introduce themselves to the patient and shake hands
- Treat the patient with respect
- Behave professionally
- Are courteous not only to the patient but also to the spouse, family members, and other visitors
- Speak directly to the patient (instead, that is, of addressing comments to colleagues or referring to the patient as a "diagnosis" or "case")
- Are prompt
- Pay attention to family needs
- Involve both the patient and the family in making decisions about care

Focus group participants also said that physicians should leave business cards when they visit because such cards help patients remember physicians' names and specialties.

**Convenience** Participants said the following factors influence them when they choose a hospital:

- A physician's recommendation
- The hospital's reputation
- Its proximity to the patient's home
- Its hours of service

*Continued on page 95*

## PATIENTS DEFINE "SERVICE"

*Continued from page 96*

- Its flexibility in scheduling
- The simplicity of its billing system
- The accessibility of its parking
- The efficiency of its admission process
- The brevity of its waiting time for tests

Participants also said they preferred hospitals that contact the patient for follow-up after discharge.

### INFORMATION POINTS TOWARD EXCELLENCE

SJMMC's leaders made some procedural changes immediately after the focus group discussions. For example, staff members were given new scrub uniforms that are color-coded according to their departments, so that patients and family members can identify them easily. Staff members were also encouraged to:

- Attend in-service sessions
- Wear name tags bearing their photographs
- Clearly announce themselves to patients and family members when entering a room
- Strengthen their listening skills and treat patients and family members with respect

In addition, SJMMC has incorporated the focus group information into its Performance Excellence Process and also into the Patient Focused Care Program and the Performance Appraisal System, two methods used to fulfill the Performance Excellence Process.

The Performance Excellence Process, one of SJMMC's three key corporate strategies, was established to encourage employees to not only provide care that produces the best and most cost-effective clinical outcomes, but to provide it in such a courteous and professional manner that it exceeds the expectations of both patients and their families. The process's specific goals are quality, service, satisfaction, and cost containment—plus keeping all these in balance while maintaining the integrity of the mission and values of SJMMC's sponsor, the Religious Sisters of Mercy.

The Patient Focused Care Program, on the other hand, is a redesign of SJMMC's traditional processes. Emphasizing the needs of patients rather than the convenience of hospital

departments, the program works to eliminate the many delays, duplications, and obstacles that patients tend to experience during a hospital stay.

The Corporate Values/Service Excellence program is an integral part of the Performance Appraisal System, making up as much as 50 percent of an employee's overall job performance rating. This part of the appraisal system has three components:

- **Organizational.** This component encourages staff members to be familiar with SJMMC's mission, vision, and values, and to align their behavior with these values in service to others.

- **Individual.** This component urges staff to be true to the organization's values; adapt to, and work effectively with, change; take initiative; set challenging objectives; and seek opportunities to learn.

- **Team.** This component urges staff to build and maintain positive relationships with people and to appreciate differences in style, approach, and background.

Together these three components of the Performance Appraisal System encourage hospital employees to be of service to customers. Customer service is now expected of SJMMC employees because of its importance to the medical center's growth and success.

### LESSONS FOR LEADERS

The main lesson of the focus group research was that SJMMC's leaders must emphasize customer service in all their quality efforts. The focus group discussions reminded the leaders that a hospital's patients are its guests, and that the same is true of patients' friends and family members. Because customer service begins at the top, our leaders now emphasize it in their teaching, decision making, and behavior with others. In hiring new employees, for example, they seek persons who have not just the necessary technical skills but also those organizational, individual, and team skills emphasized in the three Performance Appraisal System components. □

 For more information, contact Linda Byerly, RN, at 314-569-6265.

## BROOKLYN HOSPITAL

*Continued from page 89*

Phelps and his St. Mary's colleagues have therefore developed a more grassroots approach to communications. This year, for example, they faxed news releases about the baby shower to each of the more than 200 parishes in the diocese, asking the parishes to mention the event in their weekly bulletins. They also distributed announcements of the event to employees of all CMC hospitals, nursing homes, and outpatient clinics.


But perhaps the most effective advance publicity was provided by St. Mary's employees themselves. By telling friends and relatives about hospital events, they have developed their own "marketing network," one that is supported by the hospital's administrators. "Many of the hospital's employees are local residents, and many of them serve as ambassadors to their neighborhoods or to the local organizations in which they are active," said Enid McCoy, St. Mary's executive director.

In addition, this year St. Mary's took the following measures:

- Local schools and other organizations were invited to participate in the health education program and the parade. Teachers gave their pupils announcements about Children's Day to take home.

- St. Mary's distributed fliers about Children's Day and the baby shower throughout its catchment area. Fliers were also posted in the hospital and each of its Family Care Centers.

- Trustees and administrators of St. Mary's and members of its community advisory board helped promote the events and participated in them. Since such persons are also often leaders or members of other local organizations—for example, businesses, social service agencies, other healthcare providers, planning boards, churches and synagogues, and PTA groups—they have the ability to draw much of the community into such an effort. □

 For further information, contact Stephen E. Phelps, Jr., at 718-558-6962.