

Emergency Department Volunteers: Defining the position and its effect on the Patient Experience

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Abstract:

Research Question: Will trained volunteers significantly affect patient experience compared to educational fliers or no intervention?

Background: Patient experience continues to be an important issue with our nation's healthcare system especially with the adoption of Value Based Purchasing for hospital reimbursement. With the use of Honor Health Scottsdale's large number of volunteers, we hoped to design and develop a program that will improve experience for patients presenting to a community based Emergency Department. **Objective:** To evaluate the impact of Emergency Department Volunteers on the patient experience.

Methods: Patients in the intervention groups either had an encounter with a trained volunteer or were given an information pamphlet describing their emergency department visit. Patients in the control group received usual emergency department care without exposure to the above interventions. All groups completed an online patient experience survey. Statistics were performed to compare the 3 groups on the patient experience.

Results: 1009 patients were enrolled in the study. Patients who had a volunteer encounter M=4.66 or received the pamphlet M=4.72 rated their emergency department higher than the control patients M=4.19. The highest level of patient experience was among the patients who received the informational pamphlets.

Conclusions: The use of volunteers as well as an informational pamphlet can improve the patient experience in the Emergency Department.

Introduction:

In October 2012, the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) began reimbursing hospitals based on the Hospital Value Based Purchasing Program (VBP). In addition to performance on clinical core measures, hospitals also are financially rewarded or penalized based on inpatient patient experience scores or HCAHPS (Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers & Systems). Currently, only inpatient patient experience scores are used; however, EDCAHPS (Clinician and Group or Emergency Department Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers & Systems) will likely be used in the near future.

Several studies have evaluated the use of interventions in the Emergency Department to improve patient experience [1,2], while other studies sought to test the effect of increased information to the patient to improve their experience. One study found that patients desire information on the ED process [3], while some studies have showed varying results [1,2].

In our study, we sought to design and implement a volunteer program with delineated tasks for the patient encounter in the Emergency Department to improve patient experience.

The primary endpoint for this study was patient experience as measured by a patient experience survey developed by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Methods:

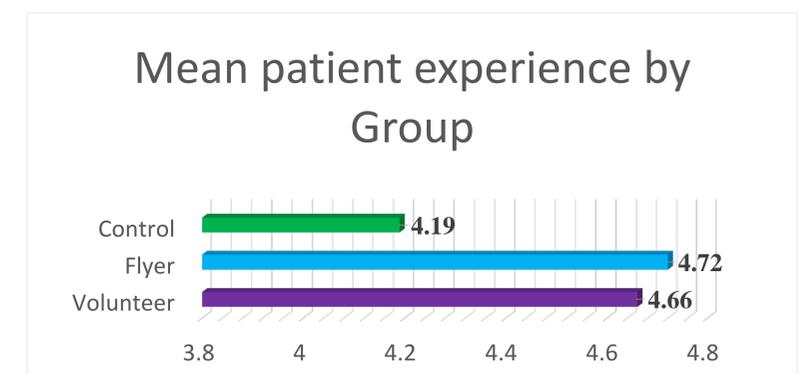
We evaluated feedback from previous patients and surveyed hospital volunteers to determine what were the most effective interventions a volunteer could perform to improve the patient experience in the Emergency Department. After collecting the responses, we concluded that volunteers could best help patients in four ways: To provide patients with a realistic timeline of their stay, to perform a comfort measure for the patient such as providing a warm blanket or a glass of water, to provide assurance that the patient had not been forgotten by the nurses or doctors and finally the volunteers were to give frequent check-ups to see how the patient was feeling and see if they had questions.

Emergency department volunteers who agreed to participate in the study were trained on these interventions as well as core behaviors.

Patients in the intervention groups either had an encounter with a trained volunteer or were given an information pamphlet describing their emergency department visit. Patients in the control group received typical emergency department care without exposure to the above interventions. All groups completed an online patient experience survey. Results of the survey were evaluated to compare the 3 groups on the patient experience.

Results:

1009 patients were enrolled in the study. Patients who had a volunteer encounter M=4.66 or received the pamphlet M=4.72 rated their emergency department higher than the control patients M=4.19. The highest level of experience was among the patients who received the informational pamphlets. Statistical analysis demonstrated that this difference in patient experience between the volunteer and control group was significant ($p < .001$) as was the difference between pamphlets and control group ($p < .001$). However, we found no significant difference between the pamphlet group and volunteers ($p = 0.06$).



Results of patient experience surveys

Conclusion:

We concluded that the use of volunteers as well as an informational pamphlet can improve the patient experience in the Emergency Department. As the demands on physicians and nurses time continue to increase, we must find other ways to provide the best experience for patients we can. While nothing can replace a physician taking time to listen to a patient and having a meaningful human connection with their patients, we believe that these results indicate that volunteers and other resources can supplement the care of health professionals to significantly improve the patient experience.

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