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Original

Patient satisfaction in dermatology: a qualitative assessment

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Abstract

Patient satisfaction is of growing interest to the medical field. Qualities essential to patient satisfaction with primary care providers have been characterized, but little work has been done to assess factors that affect patient satisfaction in dermatology. The objective of this study was to determine factors essential to patient satisfaction in dermatology. Qualitative data from an online survey were collected and organized thematically relying on a previously established coding scheme for patient satisfaction comments. Themes studied include the character of the physician, communication, time, care, and qualities of the office staff. Doctors with good character who communicated effectively and spent sufficient time with patients received high satisfaction. An efficient and friendly office staff also contributed to high satisfaction. Poor patient satisfaction was mainly linked to flaws in physician demeanor, lack of communication, and rushed appointments. A limitation to the study included potential bias of an online survey sample, although the widespread use of the tool to capture more respondents in dermatology may mitigate this limitation. To achieve high patient satisfaction, it is vital that a physician is cognizant of the profound effects of how his or her character, communication style, time investment, and office staff appear to patients because patients consider these factors in addition to clinical outcomes when evaluating physicians.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, patient satisfaction has increasingly received recognition as an important component to assessing quality of care [1-5]. Although there are limitations with patient satisfaction surveys, they provide insight into the patient's perspective of quality of care versus the physician's perception. What the physician may consider as excellent care may not always be perceived as such by the patient. Patient satisfaction can play an influential role in patient retention, compliance, clinical outcomes, and medical malpractice claims [1-2]. Various studies have been conducted in order to define factors that influence patient satisfaction [1,2,4]. Key qualities that patients consider when ranking primary care physicians included access to care, communication, personality and demeanor of provider, quality of medical care processes, care continuity, quality of healthcare facilities, and office staff [4]. There are few data on how these qualities resonate with patients in dermatology. The purpose of this study was to determine factors that patients report are important in care from a dermatologist by a qualitative analysis of patients' comments to an online patient satisfaction/doctor rating website.

Methods

Patient satisfaction information was derived from DrScore.com, a validated [6] online survey that gathers anonymous information from patients in ranking their healthcare experience [4]. Extensive data have been collected on dermatologists; the survey has been used by dermatologists to meet the American Board of Dermatology maintenance of certification requirements [7]. The survey includes various preset parameters that are rated on a scale of 0-10, an overall physician score out of 10, and a section for free-text

comments. A previously established coding scheme for patient satisfaction comments was used to classify patient comments into thematic domains [4], which followed Miles and Huberman's structure of qualitative analysis. The themes were manually organized by the authors.

We qualitatively analyzed one thousand free-text comments from survey responses from 2005 to 2009. Five major themes were explored: character of the physician, communication, time, care, and qualities of the office staff based on an initial review of the comments and a previous quantitative analysis of physician traits that are important to patients [7]. The themes were subdivided to better represent the variety of comments (Table 1). None of the previously established themes were added or removed in the process.

Table 1. Five major themes and the characteristics associated with them

Theme	Associated Characteristics
Character	Physician's traits Work ethic
Communication	Asking and answering questions Listening Explanation of treatment plans and surgical procedures
Time	Time to obtain appointment Wait time in office Time spent with patient in examination room
Care	Thoroughness of examination Diagnosis Outcome of procedure Prescription of medication and creams
Office Staff	Work ethic Personality Demeanor

Results

Character of the physician was the topic of more than half the comments. The vast majority of these comments reported positive qualities of physicians, including being kind, open, caring, honest, diligent, knowledgeable, patient, and personable (Table 2). In addition, some patients added that they would travel long distances and even wait days to weeks for an appointment if their physician displayed these qualities. Patients were less willing to travel or wait if the physician displayed negative traits, such as rudeness, impatience, arrogance, and dishonesty. Some of these patients went further to state that they would not recommend a knowledgeable physician if the latter displayed these traits. Based on the number of comments pertaining to the physicians' traits, a physician's character is of prime importance from the patient's perspective.

Table 2: Summary of findings and representative comments

Theme	Result	Representative Positive Comments	Representative Negative Comments
Character	<p>Patients identified the following as desirable qualities: kind, open, caring, honest, diligent, knowledgeable, patient and personable.</p> <p>Undesirable qualities were: arrogance, dishonesty, rudeness, poor bedside manner</p>	<p>“He was friendly, nice, honest, and wonderful! I wish every doctor was like him.”</p>	<p>“Unpleasant, sarcastic, condescending, and made me feel uncomfortable about my condition.”</p>
Communication	<p>Patients want a physician who will listen to and properly address concerns. Patients also want to be well-informed about treatments.</p>	<p>“He's caring, listens to his patients concerns and shows his interest in helping them. He also takes the time to explain why the patient is having the skin problem.”</p>	<p>“Didn't communicate well when I asked questions; not a language issue - a communication issue.”</p>
Care	<p>Patients were generally satisfied with examinations, diagnoses, treatments and outcomes.</p>	<p>“Excellent treatment and service. Recognized my problem right away and effectively treated it without referring me to somebody else.”</p>	<p>“Terrible doctor. He did not examine me, did not ask questions, and did not give a diagnosis. He prescribed a treatment</p>

			regimen that had previously made the problem worse.”
Time	Appointments were fairly easy to schedule. Though satisfactory, patients would like to spend more time with physician and less time waiting.	“He actually spent time with me and explained things so I understood options.”	“I waited 1 hour to be seen after I've made an appointment. She rushed through my examination; did not give thorough explanations or even take the time to ask if I had any questions.”
Staff	Patients appreciate organized, caring and helpful staff.	“Doctor and her staff are great. I felt very comfortable with them and actually enjoyed having my procedure. “	“His administrative staff is unprofessional and I would not recommend anyone to his practice based on my experience.”

Communication and its associated factors received the second most comments. Patients largely conveyed satisfaction with communication with their dermatologists and were grateful to physicians who listened to and addressed concerns, answered questions, and explained treatments. The relatively few negative comments were about feeling ignored by the physician and leaving with unaddressed questions.

The next major group of comments focused on thoroughness of examinations, accuracy of diagnoses, and efficacy of treatments. Based on the comments, patients generally were satisfied with the quality of care they were receiving. More comments focused on the quality of the physical exam compared to the collection of history. Patients reported that the best examinations were those in which the physician took his or her time to view all areas and even touch those that were affected. Those who felt rushed were concerned whether they were receiving the correct diagnosis and treatment.

The fourth largest group of comments pertained to time and received less overall satisfaction than the previous themes. Most complaints regarding time were not centered on length of time to get an appointment or time spent in the waiting room, but on whether the patient felt that he or she was not given adequate time with the physician. Many patients who responded with negative feedback complained that examinations and collection of history were rushed and that they felt hurried to ask questions. Other patients were less specific but related sentiments of disappointment for having to wait a long time only to receive a few minutes with the physician. There was also a general feeling of concern about whether their best interests were being served. Conversely,

the positive comments related the opposite; the physician spent plenty of time gathering history, conducting exams, answering questions, and explaining treatments. Some patients further relayed that their time with the physician was worth the wait.

The office staff also plays a role in how patients rate healthcare. This category received the fewest comments in rating the overall health care experience, but generally received positive feedback. Positive comments described staff members as being helpful, well-organized, and caring. Staff received negative feedback for being rude, unprofessional, and unhelpful. For these reasons, patients occasionally would not recommend the physician.

Discussion

Quantitative analyses find that patients are highly satisfied with dermatologists [2,7]. These studies measured satisfaction with scales that ranged from 0-10, but did not provide further insight about why patients rated dermatologists so highly. The qualitative analysis in the current study complements the results in the previous studies by providing a level of detail about factors that is not identifiable from the quantitative data.

In this study, five major themes that were highly salient to patients based on their open comments were identified. These included the character of the physician, communication, quality of care, time, and qualities of the office staff. Overall, patients regarded these themes with high satisfaction. Although patients did not explicitly give their opinion of the relative importance of these themes, certain themes were more prevalent among the comments possibly suggesting their relative importance and were presented in this order.

Given that the majority of the comments centered on character and communication, it is essential for the physician to establish rapport with the patient. Patients identified kindness, openness, friendliness, and honesty for a successful patient-physician relationship. Patient satisfaction is determined almost exclusively by whether the patient feels they are seeing a caring doctor [8]. The physician should not appear condescending, but convey empathy. After taking time to establish rapport, the physician should spend sufficient time collecting history, conducting a physical exam, answering questions, and explaining treatments, leaving the patient satisfied that his or her concerns are being addressed. Taking time for better communication with each patient may result in a backlog of patients in the waiting room, but may prove beneficial. A previous study presented that time spent with the physician is a more important determinant of patient satisfaction than time spent in the waiting room and that a short time spent with the physician after a long wait is a “toxic combination” and counter-productive [9].

There can be a disparity between how care is objectively provided and how it is perceived subjectively by the patient. Giving the correct diagnosis and appropriate treatment is not sufficient because patient satisfaction depends on multiple other factors. It is critical to give patients the impression that they are unique individuals with unique complaints and not just another case of psoriasis or acne. Time management and efficiency is a difficult balancing task for many health care professionals especially in an age in which reimbursements are falling, expenses are rising, new EMR systems are being used, and there is an expectation to see a certain number of patients. Patients unaware of these complexities who receive less time with the physician are likely to perceive their physician as careless, rude, and abrupt. If the doctor is rushed but can give the impression otherwise, by building rapport and assuring that patients feel they received a careful examination, perception of a caring doctor can be achieved even if the visit is short. By recognizing the subjective nature of patient satisfaction, physicians may reassess the care they give and make improvements accordingly.

Attending to the context of the visit also affects patients’ perceptions of the doctor. Rude office staff and poor facilities may directly impact patient satisfaction, but in addition, such a negative context can cause the physician to be perceived as uncaring [10]. Recognizing the subjective nature of patient satisfaction, physicians may wish to reassess the entire experience of care that their patients receive.

Patient satisfaction surveys, as used in this study, can provide a glimpse into the patient’s thought process when evaluating a healthcare provider. A limitation of using data collected from an online survey include the potential for sampling bias because patients lacking computer skills are less likely to submit an online survey than those who are computer savvy. Unhappy patients are more likely to complete a survey than happy patients. This is more of a limitation for a quantitative study than for a qualitative study. However, selection bias may be small in this study because the survey system from which the data were obtained is widely used by dermatologists to meet ABD certification requirements.

Physicians do not go through extensive training in order to provide what patients perceive as mediocre care. Physicians strive to provide patients with the best quality of care. Patient satisfaction is an important component of care in its own right and

contributes to treatment adherence [2]. Attending to patient satisfaction, a subjective entity, is essential to achieving the best possible outcomes.

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