

What Do Patients Want?

One way to find out is to ask them via a patient advisory council.

“I have learned that people will forget what you said. People will forget what you did. But people will never forget how you made them feel.” This quote, often attributed to author and poet Maya Angelou, is a good reminder for those of us in health care.

“Patient experience” is key to patient-centered care. It is the sum of all interactions the patient has when accessing health care, including appointment scheduling, check in, rooming, the clinician visit, labs, referrals, and follow-up scheduling. “Patient satisfaction” is the measure of how well the entire experience met patients’ expectations. Did they wait longer than they had anticipated? Was the clinic environment as warm and welcoming as they had hoped it would be? Did they feel listened to and cared for?

Most primary care practices measure patient satisfaction, and some practices use the results in payment decisions and clinician ratings. Clinicians are sometimes frustrated that practicing medicine requires adopting a mentality that “the customer is always right.” However, improved patient experience is correlated with improved clinical outcomes, patient safety, and patient adherence to treatment plans.^{1,2} Studies of patient experience consistently outline common themes that predict patient satisfaction, such as strong communication skills, attention to individual needs, and streamlined workflow.^{3,4}

To delve deeper into what patients want within each of

these general themes, practices can set up patient advisory councils. Patients can often see gaps in service or policies that are preventing excellent experiences. Advisory councils give patients a way to influence the design of the clinic, certain workflows, and clinical priorities.⁵ These councils also help practices solve process challenges, like improving wait times, addressing communication issues, or helping to design specific quality improvement projects.^{6,7} Councils usually meet monthly or every other month, with food provided if the meeting is in person, and patients receive a small honorarium for each meeting they attend. Those who participate feel that they are making a difference in how the clinic operates.^{6,7} The Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality has developed a toolkit to help practices better engage patients and families.⁸ This toolkit offers best practices and a step-by-step process for starting a patient advisory council.

Returning to the quote mentioned earlier, we may be disappointed that our patients do not remember what we said or did, but those things are easily fixed. We can write down after-visit summaries that recap the key points we discussed during the visit and the jointly developed plan. We can instruct clinical support staff to call patients after their visits or send portal messages to make sure they don’t have any more questions.

But, really, what our patients want is to feel heard, respected, and cared for. And we want them to remember that they have a partner in their health — their primary

care health care team. We want them to feel like they matter. Patient advisory councils can help make that happen. **FPM**



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