Overcoming the perception gap of restructured hospital patients

By NISHA RAMCHANDANI
CONTINUOUSLY improving product and service quality as well as managing expectations can help raise satisfaction levels of unsubсидised patients at restructured hospitals.

One of the key findings from the latest Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore (CSISG), conducted by the Institute of Service Excellence at the Singapore Management University (ISES), is that subsidised patients are more satisfied with service from the restructured hospitals sub-sector while unsubsidised patients are less satisfied.

"The data shows there is a difference between patient expectations and experience ... and when they do not feel they are getting this higher level of service, they become less satisfied customers," said Marcus Lee, academic director at ISES.

The perception gap can, however, be overcome, say academics.

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One of the key findings from the latest Customer Satisfaction Index of Singapore (CSISG), conducted by the Institute of Service Excellence at the Singapore Management University (ISES), is that subsidised patients are more satisfied with service from the restructured hospitals sub-sector than unsubsidised patients.

Restructured hospitals scored 66.1 - the score for 2010 was 67.7, while public hospitals scored 62.1, versus 62.3 in 2010, and private hospitals scored 69, compared to 68.7 in 2010.

There is also a widening gap in satisfaction year-on-year between patients who received government subsidies on their hospital bills and those who didn't.

To narrow the gap, restructured hospitals may want to look at how they can provide distinct levels of service to full-fee paying customers, suggests Caroline Lim, director at Institute of Service Excellence.

One way to deliver this would be to have exclusive waiting rooms for unsubsidised patients or separate queues to cut down on waiting time at the pharmacy. Essentially, restructured hospitals need to "find out what (unsubsidised patients) are expecting when they pay full fee" and also "communicate to them what they should be expecting" when they pay full price, she added.

The challenge facing public hospitals is limited resources, stressed Liak.

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Teng Lit, chief executive, Khoo Teck Puat Hospital.

"(We) must adjust expectations. On average, a public sector doctor will see two to three times more patients on the same day compared to (a) private sector (doctor)," Mr Liak said, adding that hospitals in the public sector also have to deal with high demand, resulting sometimes in a bed crunch or long waiting times at the accident & emergency department.

Still, public hospitals such as Khoo Teck Puat must work more efficiently to speed up diagnosis and treatment so that it can handle a higher patient load and shorten waiting times, he went on to add.

For instance, streamlining processes in the emergency department and clearing the bottlenecks can be one way to improve operational efficiency, Mr Liak said.

"We will need to work hard to meet rising expectations while supporting the increased patient volume and managing the constraints," said Joe Sim, chief executive of National University Hospital, another one of the hospitals tracked in the study.

"We will continue to work on improving our communication with our patients and their family members, and must also learn to listen more to patients and make improvements based on their feedback."

Mr Sim highlighted initiatives NUH has put in place to improve the delivery of healthcare, including sending doctors from the relevant specialties down to the emergency department to check on patients if there is a shortage of available beds in the wards.

Other restructured hospitals tracked under the sub-sector are Tan Tock Seng, Changi General, Singa-