Achieving Success in Day Surgery Services

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Improving the patient experience of care in the day surgery setting presents some special challenges. For one thing, day surgery patients tend to be healthier and less inconvenienced in receiving care than their inpatient counterparts, so their satisfaction scores are already high. Also, day surgery patients demand fast service with top quality.

Both hospital-based and freestanding day surgery centres have grown in number over the past few years, as has the level of competition, which further underscores the importance of achieving and maintaining high customer satisfaction levels. It is imperative for day surgery centres to capture and act upon patient satisfaction data in order to stay competitive and profitable.

The February 2011 snapshot profiles the initiatives that are typically in place in all high performing day surgeries.
A young friend of mine recently suffered a complete fracture of his right radius and ulna after a playground accident. Due to the displacement of the bones, he required an open reduction along with the placement of several screws to hold the bones in place. The day of the incident he was seen by the doctor immediately and then taken to a day surgery centre. Within hours he was in surgery and was home later that evening.

In an industry plagued by long waits, high demand, and limited resources, what made this case go so smoothly? It wasn’t an unusually slow day at the hospital, nor was this a life-or-death case. Yet, through developed systems and processes well executed by the health care team, he was able to receive prompt, compassionate care that left a permanent impression on his parents. The question that remains is what can be done so that this story is repeated across health care facilities nationwide.

As advances in surgical technology make procedures less invasive and speed patient recovery, the demand for same day surgery services has continued to grow. These services are typically well reimbursed by health insurance, making them a strong source of revenue for health care organisations. With this type of service being so lucrative, providers have seen a wealth of competition arise in the day surgery market.

To remain competitive, centres must provide a high quality care and service experience. While there are many day surgery centres that are strong performers, some stand out from the field. Following is a summary of best practice principles that these leaders employ designed as a how-to guide for the industry:

**Setting the Standard**

Before any improvement effort is begun, it is important to establish a clear goal that supports the overall mission of the organisation. Whether the goal is an improvement in clinical outcome, reduction in incidents or a lift in patient satisfaction ratings, the leaders need to define the goal and communicate it throughout the organisation. In high performing day surgery centres this data is openly shared in monthly staff meetings, with outcomes recognised and rewarded without restraint. These organisations are very transparent in posting results for all to see, (good or bad).

Another part of setting the standard is providing clear expectations for employees backed by an accountability framework that locks initiatives in place. It is extremely frustrating for employees to be handed a vision without any direction. One of the first places to begin is by identifying behaviour standards that employees should follow.

**First Impressions Count**

High performing day surgery centres reach out to patients prior to their arrival. The first step is the pre-op phone call. Typically, the pre-op phone call staff receive a list of recently scheduled patients. Staff take the patient’s insurance information, physical history, and other relevant information. Importantly, the centre should provide patients with detailed information about how to prepare for their experience, including directions to the facility, parking information, what time to arrive, when they can anticipate going to surgery, what to expect when they arrive, and preoperative instructions.

Staff should proactively provide an opportunity to ask questions and provide a phone number directly into the centre for any additional questions before the visit.

These organisations also acknowledge that a patient and their family are asked to read a large volume of written documents, prior to, during and after their care. Everything from rights and responsibilities to home care instructions. They ensure that all communication is tested for readability and that the documents have an age reading level no higher than 12 years. They also ensure that all signage inside and outside the facility is up to date, well positioned and easily understood.

Some organisations even provide pre-visit tours for paediatric patients and their families to see the facility prior to surgery. Many facilities have developed virtual tours of their centres on their Website. During the pre-op phone call, patients are informed about the virtual tour. These options provide patients another opportunity to prepare for their experience.
Understanding Patient Expectations

During the pre-op phone call, staff also listen closely for any patient expectations and then work to make sure those needs are accommodated or managed. On many occasions, patients may misinterpret the instructions provided by their doctor or from the doctor’s administration staff.

For example, during the call the patient may assume they will be admitted to the hospital, which may not be the case. The key to success is allowing staff to tackle any problem or issue immediately. By working through problems as soon as they arise, the staff members are able to more effectively manage service recovery and improve the patient experience.

Manage Waiting Time

We know from experience that when a person is worried, sick, pressured, nervous, in pain, bored, uncomfortable, hungry, restless or fearful, every minute of waiting feels like an hour. All kinds of waits irritate and stir resentment toward the care team. The day surgery environment is no different.

Advances in technology have destroyed what small tolerance people have for waiting. E-mail, voicemail, texting, fax, facebook, twitter and the like have changed people’s expectations. As there are several waiting stages in the day surgery journey - managing waiting time at each stage is crucial for day surgery satisfaction. The four stages are:

• Waiting for surgery on a waiting list;
• Waiting in the reception/waiting room;
• Waiting to see the surgeon and anaesthetist once inside;
• Waiting to go home;

Research shows us that there are a number of factors that impact on a patient’s perception of waiting:

- Anxiety makes waiting seem longer;
- Waits of uncertain length are harder to tolerate;
- Waiting feels longer when you don’t know the reason;
- People are less tolerant when their wait feels unfair.
- Pre-process waits feel much longer than in-process waits.
- Waiting alone feels longer than waiting in a group.
- Occupied time feels shorter than unoccupied time.

Day Surgery Waiting Time Strategies

1. Speed up the process. Eliminate or reduce delays through process and technology improvements. Using quality improvement processes:

• eliminate redundancies and duplication;
• Limit the number of different people a patient has to interact with;
• reduce the distances they have to travel;
• locate all supplies and equipment and forms at the caregivers' fingertips;
• eliminate obsolete steps;
• acquire tools that work faster—faster computers, faster processing devices;
• do flow analyses, and staff up at the logjam points;

2. Remove the term “waiting room” from all signs, literature and people’s vocabulary. It sets up a negative expectation right from the start.
3. **Provide diversions.** Make the patient’s time feel like it’s going faster. Mystery shop and ask fellow patients to brainstorm diversions. Suggestions include board or word games, brochures about the provider, a meet-the-staff bulletin board, internet access, computer games, fish tanks and more. Frustrated and bored children have a major impact on a parent’s perception of waiting time. Small play corners take the pressure off, and the noise. Fish tanks can be a fascination for children. They can often be expensive, so conduct a fund raising exercise in your local community to install a fish tank in your facility.

4. **Adjust the patient’s expectations.** Under-promise and over-deliver. Discourage staff from predicting a wait length that is unrealistically short. Encourage staff to proactively shape the patient’s expectations. It isn’t the actual length of the wait that matters. It’s what you’ve been led to expect about the length of the wait, and whether that prediction turns out to be fact or fiction.

One of the easiest ways to overcome issues with wait time in the day surgery is to manage the patient’s expectations from the moment they walk in.

5. **Update the patient and family about delays:**

- **Approach frequently:** At least every 30 minutes, a staff person should walk over to the patient and family and give an update on the delay, making them know they are not forgotten.

- **Provide a personal apology:** "Mrs. Hunt, I’m so sorry we haven’t been able to take you yet. I want you to know we haven’t forgotten about you!"

- **Explain the delay with the patient’s perspective in mind:** For instance, "Previous surgery is taking longer than we predicted".

- **Estimate the length of their wait:** "My estimate is that it will take another ___ or ___ minutes before we’re ready for you. If that changes, I’ll stop back and let you know." Don’t say, "We have no idea when we’ll be ready for you." Or "It’s crazy today."

- **Offer relief:** For instance, "Can I get you a magazine, or would you like some water?"

- **Thank both the patient and family for their patience.** "I’ll be sure to let you know if there’s a change."

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**Stagger Admissions**

To enhance patient care and reduce patient waits, all high performing day surgeries stagger admissions throughout the day. They successfully partner with their surgeons and anaesthetists to make this happen.

**After Surgery Strategies**

Post-operative recovery presents another opportunity to exceed patients’ expectations. Patients need proper time to recover after a procedure. In many busy day surgery centres, patients feel rushed out the door once the procedure is complete. Simple strategies to manage these perceptions include:

- Never use a busy schedule as an excuse for a delay.
- Look for ways to rearrange the process and setup to minimise noise and traffic.

Most centres run efficient operations, but sometimes efficiency can be perceived by patients as rushing. Don’t send patients home until they feel ready. If the day is busy, don’t communicate that to the patient.
Post-operative Phone Call

Research reveals that discharge follow-up phone calls provide an invaluable opportunity to evaluate patient education, identify trends that may require improvement in the day surgery practice, improve patient quality of care, determine patients’ compliance with discharge instructions, and assess overall impressions of the day surgery performance.

Most importantly the call helps prevent post discharge adverse events by connecting with the patients for a positive clinical outcome.

The key to a successful phone call connection is to let patients know to expect a post-op phone call at home within 24 hours.

Connecting with Patients

Press Ganey’s research clearly demonstrates that patient interactions with their care providers is the single most important factor to their overall satisfaction. Vital to having an empathetic and caring staff is developing a culture where these ideals are supported. The organisation’s leadership must demonstrate these values and support staff in their efforts to meet patient needs.

Leading day surgery centres know that patient satisfaction is driven by interactions taking place at each of their ‘moments of truth’ – before, during and after the experience at the centre. Patients expect that the clinical skill is in place - communication and behaviour are the keys to satisfaction success. How staff behave is dependent on the cultural climate within the organisation, which in turn is a direct reflection of the leadership of the organisation.

Conclusion

Day surgery centres are bustling places where new patients arrive and leave the same day. Connecting with these patients requires improving the experience before they enter the facility, waiting, experiencing the surgery and after they walk out the door. The tips provided in this article demonstrate how excellence in the patient experience can be achieved year after year. Many of the tactics employed are not complicated or expensive but require a “constancy of purpose” to achieve success.