The Satisfaction Snapshot is a monthly electronic bulletin freely available to all those involved or interested in improving the patient/client experience. Each month the Snapshot showcases issues and ideas which relate to improving patient satisfaction and customer service, improving workplace culture and improving the way we go about our work in the healthcare industry.

The Satisfaction Snapshot features:
- relevant articles from healthcare industry experts
- case study success stories
- tips and tools for quality improvement
- patient satisfaction and other industry research findings
- articles with ideas to help achieve success in your role

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Staff can lessen anxiety and resentment by keeping patients informed, explaining the reason for the delay and providing diversions.

By Wendy Leebov

You 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. Waiting for appointments, waiting to see the doctor, waiting for results, waiting for a callback, waiting for an answer, waiting, waiting, waiting—all kinds of waits irritate and stir resentment toward the care team. Just eavesdrop in a waiting room for a few minutes, and you'll hear, "They think their time is more valuable than mine! They have no respect for my time!"

Advances in technology have destroyed what small tolerance people had for waiting under these circumstances. E-mail, voicemail, texting, fax, express post, instant messaging, high-speed Internet and the like have changed people's expectations. We want it now.

Growing impatience makes it extremely difficult to achieve and sustain patient satisfaction. As consumers become understandably and increasingly demanding, speed has become a powerful competitive factor in patient satisfaction.

Alas, what are we to do?
The Psychology of Waiting

When people are waiting, they are under a lot of stress. The Service Encounter, edited by J. Czepiel (Lexington Books, 1984), talks about an entire psychology of waiting. Consider these facts about waiting, along with ideas to reduce the stress:

**Anxiety makes waiting seem longer.** We need to figure out words and ways to reduce anxiety. For example:

- "If you need to use the toilet, don't hesitate. You won't lose your turn."
- "If you need to let someone know how long you'll be, you're welcome to use this phone or your mobile phone."
- "Would you like to read a magazine?"

**Waits of uncertain length are harder to tolerate.** Too often, staff say nothing about the upcoming wait because they are embarrassed about it or they don't know how to estimate it. Nevertheless, we need to write scripts that staff can use to advise patients of the waiting time. For instance, "The doctor will be able to see you within 20 minutes." Or "It can take up to four hours before the doctor can see you because some procedures take unexpectedly long periods of time."

**Waiting feels longer when you don't know the reason for the wait.** People sit there stewing when we don't explain why we're keeping them waiting. We need to make regular updates by staff a routine, not an afterthought. "Mrs. Jones, I realise you've been waiting for nearly two hours. I'm really sorry. I want to explain and give you an update. We've had ambulances bring in trauma victims through another entrance.

These people have needed a lot of our staff's attention because they are in life-or-death situations. I'm sorry this has meant that you're waiting a long time. At this point, I'm estimating that it could be another 90 minutes."

**People are much less tolerant when their wait feels unfair.** Let patients know why they're waiting longer than others: "Mr. Hardy, I want to explain why some people who arrived after you might be seen before you. People in this area are here for three different services. You will be called when the team that provides the specific service you came for is ready. So, it may appear that others are taken before you."

**The more valuable the service, the longer a person is willing to wait.** This is no excuse for being callous about keeping people waiting. Just because they lack alternative providers or want this doctor or this service, it doesn't make it acceptable to perpetuate long waits. Fix the flow to reduce the delays out of respect for the patients.

**Pre-process waits feel much longer than in-process waits.** It's important to get the care process going, even if there will be delays along the way. Many emergency departments do bedside registration, have staging areas or have triage nurses initiate tests immediately so that the person can be in process right away, even though there might then be long delays.

In outpatient areas, people have an easier time waiting in the exam room than they do in the reception area because they feel that at least they are in process.

**Waiting alone feels longer than waiting in a group.** It helps the time pass if family and friends can keep a patient company during any delays. If you have a policy that prevents family and friends from joining patients in the exam room, reconsider it.

**Occupied time feels shorter than unoccupied time.** When people don't have anything to do, the wait time feels longer. We need to use our considerable creativity and find ways to keep people occupied while they're waiting.

**If people think you feel really bad about inconveniencing them, they will be less angry at you.** We need to help the individuals on our teams eat humble pie and sincerely apologise to patients and families when we keep them waiting, no matter whose fault it is.
Plan of Action

Here’s the personal five-point plan for increasing respect for our customers’ time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Waiting List</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1. Speed up the process.</strong> Eliminate or reduce delays through process and technology improvements. Using quality improvement processes:</td>
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<tr>
<td>➢ eliminate redundancies and duplication;</td>
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<td>➢ limit the number of different people a patient has to interact with;</td>
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<tr>
<td>➢ reduce the distances they have to travel;</td>
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<tr>
<td>➢ locate all supplies and equipment and forms at the caregivers' fingertips;</td>
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<tr>
<td>➢ eliminate obsolete steps;</td>
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<tr>
<td>➢ hold a staff contest to find elements of the process that no longer serve a function;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ acquire tools that work faster--faster computers, faster processing devices;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ do flow analyses, and staff up at the logjam points;</td>
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**Provide diversions. Make the patient's time feel like it's going faster.** Mystery shop and ask fellow patients to brainstorm diversions. They have suggested ideas such as seek-and-find word games, brochures about the provider, a meet-the-staff bulletin board, Internet access, computer games, fish tanks and more.

A favourite for an ED reception area is an electronic bulletin board like those in hotels—with news or trivia or programmed with messages about how the ED works, the strengths of the organisation, child safety, wellness tips and more. Inexpensive subscription services can make this very easy.

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 department.

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Adjust the customer's expectations. Underpromise and overdeliver. Discourage staff from predicting a wait length that is unrealistically short. Encourage staff to proactively shape the customer's expectations.

Consider this: You call a bank for information and the bank officer says, "It will take some time to find the answer. I'll be back to you within 24 hours." Expecting it to take 24 hours, you probably won't get anxious until after those hours have passed. Let's say the bank officer gets back to you just four hours later; probably you will feel outright impressed! It's a WOW experience because you didn't expect the information so quickly. Now imagine that the bank officer says initially, "I'll get back to you within two hours," but then takes three hours before calling you back. You are probably annoyed at the bank officer's failure to keep the promise.

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. The moral: In our services, we should be adjusting customer expectations (downward if necessary), so we can meet or exceed them.

One of the easiest ways to overcome issues with wait time in the ED is to manage the patient’s expectations from the moment they walk in. If you know the wait will be 20 minutes, tell the patients it will be at least a 40-minute wait. When they are then brought in within a 20-minute window they are already impressed because they believe they are being treated early.

Institute scripts and script rehearsal so that staff members use magic, not tragic, words when communicating with patients about delays. Develop and help people deliver in an authentic way great words of apology, explanation, empathy and appreciation. See the next page for sample scripts.

Client Example:

After reviewing their patient satisfaction data, a team of nurses in an Emergency Department decided to focus on "informing patients about delays." The team included the Nurse Manager, the Assistant Nurse Manager, the Clinical Nurse Specialist, and the nursing staff in the Emergency Department. The intervention involved having the nursing staff round on designated patients every one to two hours. The nursing staff kept the patients aware and up to date of the progress. The nursing staff would inform the patients about any wait times for blood tests, x-rays, or how long it will be for them to see a doctor.

The first step in implementation was to educate the nursing staff on this intervention. The team discussed the intervention in a staff meeting and also made posters that were posted in key areas. After implementation, the team made rounds and asked the question, "Do you know what you are waiting for next?" so that they could measure the results of the intervention and to determine if it was effective. The team also regularly reviewed the results from the patient satisfaction survey for the question, "Please rate how well you were kept informed about delays?" During this period the score on this question improved from 69.4 to 80.5. Quite an improvement!
Scripts for Improving Perceptions of Waiting

Adjust expectations immediately:

On the phone. Suggest the length of time the visit will take so the customers can make arrangements. "I can give you an appointment time of ___. Because we can't predict exactly what help other patients will need before your visit, please expect to be here at least ___ hours so you won't get anxious if you do need to wait."

Upon arrival. Offer the following to help patients accept the wait better:

- **Good intention:** "I want you to know how things work, so you'll know what to expect."
- **Facts:** "We take care of a lot of people. While we try to schedule so you don't have to wait, it's very hard. Sometimes patients need more time than we predicted."
- **A good reason in the interest of the patient:** "We want to give every one of our patients all the help and information they came for, without rushing. Sometimes that causes others to wait."
- **Estimated wait:** "Today, my estimate is that you might be waiting about ___ minutes. Don't use the word guess."
- **Thank you:** "I really appreciate your patience and understanding."
- **Offer comforts:** "Would you like __________ to help make the time go faster?"
- **Thank you:** "Again, thank you so much for your patience."

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 customer's perspective in mind:** For instance, "Other patients are taking longer than we predicted, and our care team wants to give each person the time needed."
- **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 "I can't promise anything." Or "Who knows when they'll be ready. It's a zoo today."
- **Empathise:** "I know it can be hard to wait when you aren't feeling well or you have other things you want to do."
- **Offer relief:** For instance, "Can I get you a magazine, or would you like some water?"

**Apologise again and thank them:** Thank both the patient and family for their patience. "I'll be sure to let you know if there's a change."