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Patient Experience. Transformed.

IMPROVING PATIENT EXPERIENCE IN THE UAE

🔵 INTRODUCTION

The UAE's healthcare system is renowned for being among the best in the world. According to reports from 2018, there were approximately 181 doctors for every 100,000 residents in the UAE. Word of the quality of healthcare in the area has spread, causing an unprecedented rise in medical tourism, and the world-class medical facilities in the UAE are becoming increasingly in demand.

However, the healthcare industry in UAE has its fair share of challenges and problems. As per a research paper on determinants of patient satisfaction in the UAE region, it was found that although healthcare in the UAE is at par with global standards in terms of quality and accessibility, it is significantly lagging in areas like **effective communication, empathy, and responsiveness** between patients and care providers.

Responsiveness, communication, and empathy have a positive relationship with overall patient satisfaction. This implies that when patients' expectations for these are met, their perceived total satisfaction with health-care services will rise.

We rigorously analyzed 450 patient reviews on Google for 20 leading hospital brands in the UAE to under-stand the top challenges and fault lines on the patient experience side. While the hospitals garnered positive reviews for their clinical and treatment aspect, they received flak for the poor patient experience provided in areas like staff attitude, poor administration, long patient wait times, faulty and broken communication lines, lack of empathy, and most importantly a lack of humane touch. A research article published in 2021 indicated that there is a lack of motivation among healthcare providers in the UAE leading to poor service delivery. Due to this, many patients are opting to pursue healthcare services abroad.

🔵 FACTORS INFLUENCING NEGATIVE RATINGS FOR UAE'S HOSPITALS

Based on our analysis, here are the top challenges faced by patients in the UAE:

PERCEIVED LACK OF EMPATHY TOWARDS PATIENTS

The most common complaint from patients was a lack of empathy shown by staff and alienation from patients' agony. Numerous studies have shown that poor staff behavior towards patients can be the major factor compelling patients to look for other healthcare options and severely damage the hospital's reputation.

POOR COMMUNICATION LINES

Poor and sometimes blatant lack of communication was another challenge faced by patients in the UAE. Many times, they were unaware of the availability of physicians, expected wait times, confirmation of appointments, availability of lab reports, or the treatment being administered.

LONG PATIENT WAITING TIMES

While analyzing patient reviews we found that patients are facing long wait times in several departments, especially in the pharmacy and the emergency unit. A study conducted in 2019 upon a sample of 552 patients to assess their satisfaction with their waiting experience in UAE's hospitals revealed that patients are experiencing long waiting times for registration, consultation, pharmacy, and other departments.

This report's finding revealed that practices that fail to address these wait-time frustrations stand to lose up to **50%** of their patient base in a year where patients reportedly either walked out of an appointment or they have changed care providers due to long wait times.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

There is a lot of room for improvement when it comes to improving the patient experience in the United Arab Emirates.

Here are our recommendations to overcome these challenges

- Development of soft skills among staff through regular training and motivation.

- Implementing and adopting latest technology to improve patient experience.

- Ensuring frontline healthcare staff is motivated and happy.

DEVELOPMENT OF SOFT SKILLS THROUGH REGULAR STAFF TRAINING AND MOTIVATION

The "soft" skills a healthcare professional possesses have an impact on all parties involved, including patients, team members, and interdisciplinary colleagues. Patients' evaluations of their overall experience during a medical visit are frequently influenced by soft skills demonstrated by the medical staff like their attitude and body language, empathy towards patients, and the way they interact.
A study from the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons linked patients' perceptions of their physician's empathy with improved outcomes and medical care satisfaction. In fact, **65%** of patient satisfaction was attributed to physician empathy, according to the study.

During the height of the 2020 pandemic, Edelman's Trust Barometer report found that **83%** of people want a "compassionate connection" that communicates empathy and support with the struggles they face". This connection helps drive brand loyalty and create customers for life.

Essential Soft Skills for Frontline Healthcare Workers

Empathy

The ability of the staff to relate to patients and the challenging circumstances they are experiencing is crucial in the healthcare industry. An article in the British Journal of General Practice claims that empathy is frequently mentioned as a crucial component of successful, therapeutic consultations. Research has shown empathy and compassion to be associated with better adherence to medications, decreased malpractice cases, fewer mistakes, and increased patient satisfaction. Expressing empathy, one patient at a time advances humanism in healthcare.

For example, leading players in the VR industry like Sony and Oculus have developed VR headsets that enable physicians to experience the challenges themselves that a patient is going through. According to this experimental study, physicians can now experience the sufferings of a dementia patient by participating in a 3D environment created by VR technology. The simulation enabled them to visualize and hear the thoughts of the patient they embodied and the conversations of the patient's family members.

Communication Skills

The core of many workplaces is communication, but for healthcare workers it's the single most important soft skill to possess. In addition to routinely speaking with coworkers, healthcare workers also need to communicate with patients and their families. Unfortunately, employers frequently claim that among all soft skills for frontline healthcare workers, communication skills are the weakest. Not only what you say, but also how you say it, matters (demeanor, tone, eye contact, body language, etc.).

- According to research, effective verbal and nonverbal communication improves patient satisfaction, adherence, and actual health outcomes.

- Evidence suggests a strong, positive relationship between a healthcare team member's communication skills and a patient's ability to comply with medical advice, self-manage a chronic medical condition, and adopt preventive health behaviors, according to the Institute for Healthcare Communication.

- A study published in the Journal of Ambulatory Care Management found that patients' opinions of the quality of the medical care they received were significantly influenced by how well they interacted with their healthcare team and clinicians.

This suggests that effective communication skills are vital for effective patient care and satisfaction.

Ways to improve communication with patients

Assess Current Communication Channels

As a prelude to implementing new communication methods, it is imperative to evaluate current communication methods in order to identify any obvious gaps and avoid costly and even potentially fatal errors.

Reduce Unnecessary Pathways of Communication

Healthcare is a time-sensitive industry. Delays in communication can be diminished by eliminating unnecessary pathways in communication that may lead to confusion and delays. Opting for simple-to-use, always-on, and mobile communication mediums can go a long way in improving overall communication.

Seek Feedback

One major step towards improving communication is to ask for feedback from both hospital staff and patients as well. Receiving feedback from patients gives insight into how the facility's patient experience can be improved, any lacunas in patient-provider communication, and reasons for complaints, questions, or concerns.

Adopt Technology

Technology has become indispensable in today's world. In healthcare, technology can play a key role in improving existing communication lines. However, for leveraging technology to the fullest, frontline health workers need to be educated about how to use these systems effectively to ensure that all records are accurate, secure, and easy to access by all the right personnel.

Teamwork

A willingness to work as a team is an essential quality in healthcare professionals. With many people contributing to patient care, healthcare resembles team sports. The best interests of the patient depend on the staff's ability to work cooperatively with colleagues. According to a study published in the Journal of the American College of Surgeons, better patient outcomes are related to higher team functioning.

How to Promote Teamwork in Healthcare

Define Clear Roles and Shared Goals

Make sure everyone on the team is aware of their roles and responsibilities, especially if they change from shift to shift or if there are frequent personnel changes. For staff members, digital communication channels can increase clarity in this regard. To confirm the duties of each team member, pop-up notifications can be sent to both desktop computers and mobile devices.

Encourage Employee Voice

Encourage employees to raise any concerns or questions, no matter how insignificant, without being afraid to do so. Either in front of the team or on an anonymous basis. An open exchange of ideas fosters inclusivity within the group and lessens the possibility of problems lingering.

Conduct team meetings during shifts so that everyone can voice their observations and feelings.

- Are any patients a source of concern?

- Is the workload manageable?

- How motivated is the team right now?

Online surveys can be used to submit concerns that staff members are hesitant to bring up in front of the team. Keeping a healthy team dynamic requires bringing issues into the open and dealing with them.

Foster a culture of transparency

Put transparency at the forefront. Make sure that everyone on the team is aware of the daily goals. Fortunately, team members who are aware of their regular responsibilities can stay on course. Additionally, they can always reach out to their peers if they need assistance along the way.

Improve The Patient Experience Through Latest Technological Innovations

When it comes to improving patient experience throughout the care journey, implementing innovative technology at multiple touchpoints can play a crucial role in the following ways:

- **Better, Efficient, And Multiple Lines Of Patient-Provider Communication**
  Technology enables patients and providers to communicate 24x7 more quickly, clearly, and over multiple mediums like e-mail, SMS/IM, patient portal, medical health app, etc. It can also help to improve the efficiency of care delivery and reduce the cost of care.

  The good news is that patients are indeed embracing innovative technology and using it to communicate with their healthcare providers, especially after the pandemic. According to this Accenture report, about **60%** of patients are interested in using digital communication tools, and 63% affirm that the quality of their care was good or excellent.

  Similarly, another survey revealed that **70%** of the responding patients say they are more likely to choose a provider that offers reminders for follow-up care via email to text. The hospitals in the UAE can benefit from these tools, which offer automated and individualized communication pathways to patients across all service lines and cover the entire patient care journey by delivering the appropriate information at the appropriate time.

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- **Reduce Wait Times with Technology**

Tech-augmented omnichannel communication can be one of the easiest fixes for curbing long wait times.

- **83%** of patients say that if they were told in advance about a long wait time they would feel less frustrated.

- Investing in dedicated tracking technology, acknowledging the inconvenience, and apologizing for the wait can minimize frustration for nearly **70%** of patients.

- By using digital feedback collection tools care providers can ask patients about wait times and collect other kinds of helpful practice management feedback. QR codes are one such easy-to-use tool that hospitals can implement very conveniently for collecting critical feedback from patients.

Another way to lower patient wait times is by improving the front-desk workflow. This study found that one of the critical factors in reducing wait times was the front desk workflow management wherein the front desk staff was battling many fronts at the same time like trying to answer phones, field questions from patients in the waiting room, check patients in, secure insurance info, and many other tasks. Automation of these tasks enables practices to get patients seen by the physician faster and more efficiently. Appointment reminders, scheduling, and check-in are all processes that can (and should) be automated.

Ensure The Staff Is Happy And Productive

Studies confirm that employee happiness correlates with employee efficiency, creativity, and productivity. This, in turn, has the same effect on customers– proving that happy employees make customers happy.

The same holds true in healthcare too. Studies and research have proven that happier staff will lead to higher patient satisfaction, clinical outcomes, and enhanced organization performance.

For instance, higher nurse satisfaction resulted in an **87%** decrease in infection rate over two years, according to this study.

Through adoption of processes and technologies that streamline and ease the staff workflow (automated patient intake and registration, digital tools for queue management, feedback collection, request management, healthcare organizations in the UAE can ensure their staff is happier and more productive.

Another way hospitals in the UAE can improve staff productivity is by minimizing frequent burnouts. Burnout is the experience of long-term exhaustion and diminished interest in work. According to studies, healthcare workers are at elevated risk of burnout if they do not have proper stress-management techniques.

To avoid burnout, it's important for healthcare workers to have good stress management practices in place and to know how to take space from their demanding careers.

- **Ways to boost employee satisfaction and engagement:**

    Recognize top performers
    It's critical that nurses and other front-line caregivers in the healthcare industry feel recognized and valued. By adopting efficient performance management processes, hospitals can recognize top-performing staff and incentivize them.

Prioritize learning and development

In general, highly engaged workers are those who have access to "meaningful learning and development opportunities." According to research, good development opportunities can increase revenue per employee and reduce employee turnover by up to twofold.

Align employee goals with organizational goals

Clear and consistent communication of your organization's mission will give employees a reliable foundation upon which to base their own goals. By giving your employees the tools they need, such as a mentorship program or training sessions for particular skills, you can help them achieve these goals.

Collect Employee Feedback

It's always helpful to be aware of areas where your practice may already be falling short in order to make improvements to the culture and satisfaction of your staff. By putting a tool in place to help you collect feedback from your staff, you can get useful information that will help you make changes that will produce the outcomes your employees want.

CONCLUSION

The healthcare industry in the UAE has emerged as a promising global leader.
That said, it's clear that there are some genuine issues with the delivery of healthcare in the UAE, especially how patients experience care.

Given proper training, motivation, tools and technologies, and incentives healthcare professionals in the country can respond to patients' expectations in a more positive way. With the help of better policies and protocols, they could even avoid situations that contribute to negative patient experiences in the first place.

The onus is now on the different stakeholders to collaborate to improve the overall patient experience in this region.