The Forgotten Team Member: Engaging Patients in Improving Care

After finishing this activity, students will be able to:

- State how their own experiences as patients or as the family members/friends of patients affect their satisfaction with the health care system.
- Describe how to use patient experiences to improve the delivery of health care.
- Explain the importance of including patients in efforts to improve processes to deliver care.

Instructions for the facilitator (this could be the chapter leader or a chapter member):

The purpose of this exercise is to increase awareness of our health care experiences as patients, family members or care givers. Many healthcare delivery systems and procedures are developed by clinicians without taking into account the “voice of the patient.” Including the patient’s perspective when designing processes is more likely to result in value added steps and increased patient satisfaction. Yet this remains a challenge for many health care organizations and providers. There is no pre-work required for this exercise. (Please note what works and what doesn’t work during this exercise for future reference.)

1. Gather the participants in a circle. Ask that each participant recount one unfavorable or BAD experience he or she has had as a patient – or as the family member or friend of a patient.

2. Group discussion. After each story, discuss the following as a group:
   - What can we learn from this experience?
   - What do the lessons learned mean for you as a current or future clinician?
   - As a clinician, how might you act if you find yourself in a similar situation?
   - As a patient, how might you act if you find yourself in this situation (question for other participants)?
   - What can you do to prevent other people from having similar experiences?
   - What do you think it would be like to have a patient help you design a better care process? How would the process look?

3. In the circle, ask that each participant recount one GOOD experience he or she had as a patient. Participants can describe the experiences of family members or friends, if they prefer.

4. Group discussion. After each story, discuss the following as a group:
• What can we learn from this experience? What made the experience positive?
• How might you apply lessons learned to your future practice?
• What can be done to make sure more patients have similarly good experiences?

Recommendations for the facilitator if the group gets stuck or needs inspiration:

a) Describe a customer service experience either at a retail establishment or a service provider.
   • Was the individual you interacted with prompt, courteous and attentive?
   • Did you receive useful information from the service provider?
   • If your encounter was not favorable, was the individual or group receptive to suggestions on how to improve the process?

b) Clarity of communication: Health Literacy
   • Has anyone ever received confusing instructions from a doctor?
   • Did anyone stop taking certain medications or going to physical therapy because no one had explained why it was important?
   • Has anyone ever been unsure how often to take their medicine? (Lots of people get tripped up by instructions such as “Take two twice a day,” for instance.)

c) Responsiveness of Care Providers
   • Imagine you are not feeling well. For the past few days you have had some stomach discomfort and feel quite lethargic. You finally decide to call the clinic for an appointment. Because you do not say that this is an emergency, you are told to wait three days for the next available slot. During the waiting period, you recover and do not visit the clinic.

Facilitator note: Ask students to discuss similar experiences. Discuss how a patient might feel when he/she is not feeling well and is not able to access health care services quickly. What would the patient expect from the providers/system?

• Same scenario as the one above, except that the clinic advises you to come in that afternoon, as it has slots available for these situations. The doctor sees you but is not able to confirm her diagnosis. She prescribes a medication for immediate relief of the discomfort and sends you home. Later that evening, the doctor calls you to ask how you’re feeling.

Facilitator note: Discuss whether or not this type of follow up is reassuring to the patient when the doctor is not certain of the diagnosis. If the doctor does not follow up personally, who else might be able to fill this role? Are there other ways to follow up? As a patient, what are your expectations?