

HCHAPS: How Hospitals are Improving Patient Satisfaction in Oregon

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If you have not already heard of HCAHPS (pronounced “h-caps”), you will. It is fast becoming part of the regular lexicon in the health care community. HCAHPS (an acronym for Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers & Systems) is a hospital patient satisfaction survey established by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to help hospitals benchmark performance against

other hospitals and themselves.

HCAHPS provides a national standard for collecting and publicly reporting information about patients’ perspectives on hospital care. Since all hospitals take the same survey, the survey data offers an apples-to-apples comparison. The scores are reported on the website www.hospitalcompare.hhs.gov.

HCAHPS questions focus on communication with doctors and nurses, responsiveness of hospital staff, pain management, cleanliness and quietness of the hospital environment, and instructions about medications and discharge.

The HCAHPS survey asks patients to answer questions related to 10 topics. Among the survey’s 27 questions are:

- How often did nurses treat you with courtesy and respect?
- How often did nurses listen carefully to you?
- How often did doctors explain things in a way you could understand?

- During this hospital stay, after you pressed the call button, how often did you get help as soon as you wanted it?
- How often was your pain well controlled?

Fifteen hospitals from across the state have recently wrapped up a series of learning events focused on improving processes assessed by the HCAHPS questions. For hospitals participating in the Oregon HCAHPS learning network (officially called Patient Safety Learning Network, or PSLN), the top priorities are to improve nurse communication, responsiveness to patients, and communication to patients about their how to take their medication after being discharged.

Beyond helping consumers make informed decisions and increasing transparency, there is another reason why hospitals work hard to improve HCAHPS scores – it is tied to how much they get paid.

Since 2007, most hospitals have been required to submit their HCAHPS results in order to receive

full Medicare reimbursement. In the future, HCAHPS will play an even larger role. The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act establishes a Value-Based Purchasing (VBP) plan beginning in Fiscal Year 2013 (based on a hospitals' performance in 2012). This will transition providers from HCAHPS pay-for-reporting to HCAHPS pay-for-performance.

OAHHS' HCAHPS PSLN, co-hosted by the Health Research & Educational Trust, and the Agency for Health Research and Quality, was an accelerated four-month curriculum designed to help hospitals improve quality, safety and patient satisfaction. It included webcasts, a workshop, and conference calls, in which participants from several hospitals could share ideas, problem-solve and brainstorm ideas for improvement.

During their meetings, participants shared some of the ways they have been working toward improving their HCAHPS scores. For example, one hospital shared that it had created a "Patient Preferences" form for new admits. The form asks patients about their preferred ways to relax, whether they like to sleep with music or the television on, when they like to shower, how they deal with stress, and their specific visitation needs. Staff at the hospital may use the form to place the patient with a roommate who has similar preferences, and also to customize the patient's care throughout the hospital stay.

Silverton Health partly attributes its high HCAHPS scores to its Guest Relations Program. The key feature is conducting face-to-face interviews with inpatients.

"This is a key factor in doing well with patient satisfaction scores," said Ray Willey, director of quality and risk services. "The Guest Relations Specialist visits about 70 percent of our patients every month, and is able to find out what their particular issues are. We do this sometime during their stay rather than wait until after they are discharged so we can address their issues and improve their experience."

Silverton Health has been in the top 95 percent of its patient satisfaction scores with a similar survey administered by the national health-improvement group Press Ganey. Silverton is one of only 88 hospitals nationwide that has received the Press Ganey Summit Award, its highest achievement for patient satisfaction; however, the hospital wasn't willing to rest on those laurels, according to Willey. Instead, he saw raising HCAHPS scores as an opportunity for continuous improvement. Thus, Silverton Health became one of several participants in the PSLN.

Another component of Silverton's quality improvement strategy are the "Knowing how we're doing" (KHWD) boards. The KHWD boards are a foundational element of the Releasing Time to Care initiative in the MedSurg and Family Birth Center units. It is a combination of quality, safety, patient satisfaction and other measures designed to keep staff informed on their progress. They are posted in public areas so that patients and visitors can also see what those units are working on.

Another common strategy to improve HCAHPS scores is patient shadowing, in which a hospital staff member, with written patient con-

sent, follows that patient through their visit. "It is rewarding to hear from the patients who were shadowed how impressed they were that we would take time to see things from their perspective," Willey said. Many hospitals involved in the HCAHPS PSLN have used this technique to learn about where gaps in care might exist, and tailor future care accordingly.

It is important to remember, however, that there is no prescriptive way to reach high HCAHPS scores. Rather, the idea is that hospitals and their front-line care teams should come up with patient strategies that work best for them. These strategies range across the board, and hospitals are encouraged to share their successes with their peers.

The Health Research and Educational Trust is currently planning a second HCAHPS PSLN cohort, with the goal of getting even more hospitals involved.

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