

A simple guide to...

Patient experience

In the next few editions of our Simple Guides we intend to explore issues raised through the recent Francis Inquiry into the failings at Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust. In this edition we seek to shed some light on the topic of patient experience – what it means, why it's important for our Trust and the wider NHS and how understanding what our patients think about our services helps us to provide the highest quality of care.

What is patient experience?

Why is patient experience important?

How can we understand patient experience?

What do patients tell us about our Trust?

What is patient experience?

Patient experience is commonly used as a catch-all phrase that refers to aspects of care that are over and above the medical interventions carried out in hospitals and other NHS settings. This can include a broad range of things, for example the cleanliness of the hospital, waiting times, communication

and treating patients with respect and dignity. As part of the Next Stage Review in 2010, Lord Darzi identified patient experience as one of the three key elements of a high quality NHS service, alongside clinical effectiveness (making people better) and patient safety. He went further than this though,

by saying that patient experience can only be properly understood by asking patients themselves what they think of the care that they receive. This patient feedback enables us to check that we are providing a high quality service, to identify the things we do well and the things we need to improve.

Why is patient experience important?

Firstly and most obviously we want to deliver the highest quality service that we can and patient experience is a key part of this. If we don't get the patient experience right, then we are not delivering a high quality service. It goes deeper than this though, because listening and

responding to patient feedback about the care we provide is a vital source of quality assurance. As an extreme example, the Francis review of care failings at Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust found that patients and their representatives had been telling the hospital for a

number of years that there were serious failings in care, but these warnings were not heeded. It is now recognised that NHS services need to routinely capture patient feedback and use this to ensure a high quality service is being provided.

How can we understand patient experience?

In short: by asking patients, their families and carers about their experiences of our services. This can be done in a number of ways – from simply talking to people informally, to more structured approaches such as surveys, interviews and focus groups. We have a Patient Experience and Involvement Team who can advise staff on how to carry out these activities, and who also ensure that there are processes in place across the Trust to collect, understand, and use feedback about our services. These processes include:

- providing comments cards for patients and visitors to complete on wards and in clinics.
- giving patients the chance to take part in the Friends and Family Test at the end of their visit/stay. This short survey is carried out in all hospitals and asks patients whether they would recommend the care they received.

- sending trained volunteers out to wards to talk to patients in our care.
- measuring patient experience across the whole Trust via a programme of postal surveys. These surveys provide accurate patient experience data down to ward-level.
- participating in national patient surveys, which tell us how we are doing compared to other Trusts.
- reviewing and responding to comments that people post about our services on the NHS Choices website.
- holding regular events that patients, their families and carers can attend to tell us about their experiences of our services.

Complaints are also an important source of feedback, as the issues complainants raise often relate to patient experience. Each month, the Trust Board receives data from



our surveys and complaints in its public meeting. If patient ratings of care start to slip or complaints increase, then this is highlighted to the Board along with a plan describing the actions we are going to take to address this. Patient feedback is shared widely throughout the Trust so that our staff can respond to it. Survey data is also displayed on our wards, and the public can access our monthly Friends and Family Test survey results via the NHS Choices website.

What do patients tell us about our Trust?

On the whole, patients are very complimentary about the care they receive at our hospitals. Around 98% of patients say that their care was “excellent”, “very good”, or “good”. We tend to perform in line with, or better than, other NHS Trusts in the national patient survey programme and Friends and Family Test.

However, these overarching satisfaction levels can often mask specific underlying issues. For example, the glowing praise we receive often comes with some suggestions about how the patient’s experience could have been even better. This constructive criticism often relates to a single incident of poor communication or staff behaviour

that stuck with the patient, despite other aspects of their care being very good. There are also some aspects of patient experience where all NHS Trusts achieve relatively poor survey scores – for example in ensuring patients are told about potential medication side effects, waiting times in clinic, and ensuring that patients are told if they are likely to experience delays. All of our divisions are committed to improving these issues and a number of improvement projects are underway in this respect.

There is no doubt that patient experience is now a key priority for the NHS – particularly in terms of using patient feedback to assess and improve service quality. Within our

Trust we already have a comprehensive programme of patient feedback mechanisms, which feed directly in to the way the Trust works. We can do more though – we need focus on improving patient experience wherever issues are identified, and we need to ensure that staff in all areas of the Trust can easily access and use the wealth of feedback that we collect. We also need to ensure that in addition to using patient feedback to monitor services we also engage patients and the public in resolving issues – particularly as the current financial constraints mean that Trusts will face increasingly difficult decisions that will benefit from being made in partnership with patients and the public.