Defining Patient Satisfaction: Are We There Yet?

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“No,” say Lister Hill Scholars Stephen O’Connor and Richard Shewchuk. “It appears that patient satisfaction is not a well-understood phenomenon. In all likelihood, there is something of substance to it, but an examination of the literature reflects work that generally consists of empirical reports addressing idiosyncratic or context-specific questions. There are some notable exceptions, but overall the research leaves many unanswered questions.”

Over the past decade, consumer-oriented health care has emerged as the preeminent model for service delivery. Increased emphasis has been placed on giving patients a voice in expressing their views about the care they receive. In response, a large industry has emerged to offer assessment and prescriptive services intended to measure and improve patient satisfaction for health care organizations. “Our perception is that health care management practitioners often make strategic decisions based on inferences, not solid empirical support,” say O’Connor and Shewchuk. “This may create problems because the resulting practice decisions are often based on evidence that is weighed beyond its merits.”

Fundamentally, patients’ consumption of health care services is a very complex phenomenon that is likely influenced by many factors beyond a patient’s control or even awareness. Some of these factors can include convenience of location, physicians’ admitting privileges, local market characteristics, employee satisfaction, job tenure, level of training, patient health status, acuity level, and socioeconomic status.

“It is difficult to find any fault with the notion that patient satisfaction is something health care organizations should seek to achieve. Certainly, satisfied patients are preferable to unsatisfied ones. However, rigorous studies framed within meaningful theoretical models should be undertaken to better understand the role patient satisfaction plays in the delivery of patient centered health care.”