

With Hospital Food It's All About Delivery

By John Commins
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Hospital patients who had good dining experiences were also more likely to provide optimal ratings for overall food quality than patients whose expectations were not met, study finds.

Patients don't expect hospital food to taste good, and in that respect they are often not disappointed.

However, they place value on service-related elements of the meal, such as order accuracy, timeliness of delivery and staff courtesy, according to a new report from Press Ganey.

Those patients who had good dining experiences were also more likely to provide optimal ratings for overall food quality than patients whose expectations were not met, according to the study, which included data from 9,734 respondents over a three-year period from 2014-2016.

"We found that patients know that hospital food isn't going to be that great. They expect it," says James Merlino, MD, president and CMO, Strategic Consulting, Press Ganey.

"What is really important to them is the accuracy of the order and the friendliness and ability of the team; the perception that the food service workers are part of the larger team," Merlino says. "That was the significant finding that came out of the quantitative research that was backed up in the focus groups we did. Patients are willing to forego the fact that the food isn't that good. But they want it to be accurate. When they ask for something they want it to be right."

"This suggests that it's a modicum of control that patients have," he says. "Patients give up all control in this submissive hospital environment, except for this little bit of control over their daily life."

Merlino identified four target areas for improving hospital food services:

- Food service should be a pleasurable inpatient experience. “You may not need to invest a lot of money to change the food, but invest in training so that your people understand that this element of the hospital stay is important to patients,” Merlino says. “Some of that training could be raising awareness for the people in food service who are working at the bedside.”
- Teamwork makes a difference. “We’ve done extensive work on the importance of teamwork at the bedside across all areas,” he says. “The patient wants to see people working together to make sure the order is being delivered in a team fashion.”
- Meal ordering and service is important to patients. “Look at the processes for order accuracy and drilling down for why that fails and how you can improve the process to make sure that the orders coming to the patients are what they asked for,” he says.
- Special diets require special attention. “Working better together through teamwork and communicating effectively at the bedside gives patients a better understanding of why they are on a special diet they may not like, which will impact their perception across other areas,” he says.

Taking action to improve food services and presentation doesn’t take a lot of investment, Merlino says, but it does require hospitals to relook at how they’re delivering the product.

“Overall, the ability to drive teamwork and create a better experience for meeting patients’ needs at the bedside is also going to impact your reputational scores as an organization,” he says.

The Press Ganey research was conducted in conjunction with Compass One Healthcare.