

# The patient friendly pay off

Patient friendly working can benefit staff as well as patients, says *Judith Harvey*

**W**ere we, our families, or our friends to become patients we hope that we'd be treated with sensitivity and kindness. This does not always happen. How can an institution as large as the NHS find a friendly, responsive face?

The government's patient and public involvement strategy recognises the problem, but it often feels like another tick box exercise rather than a vehicle for making a difference. Patient friendly working is a way of recovering what we went into medicine for—a wish to reach out to patients. Making people feel better isn't just about curing disease, it's about responding to people's emotions.

### Put yourself in a patient's place

Thinking in patient friendly terms does not require an excess of creative imagination—just a repositioning of viewpoint. The simple trick is to put yourself in a patient's place. Then start thinking. Walk around your building with a patient's eyes and see how you notice peeling paint and how dirty coffee cups and poor signage strike you. If you ask patients you might discover that the ward curtains are too thin to keep the light out and that no one answers the telephone when they wish to change their appointment.

### Small changes make a difference

Patient friendly working doesn't necessarily mean making big changes. Little things mean a lot. And making the patient's experience happier can actually save the NHS money. Here are some examples.

- As anyone who has ever been delayed at an airport knows, lack of information increases anxiety and heats up tempers. Long waits in accident and emergency are stressful. In one hospital, receptionists decided to put up a board telling patients what the current wait was, giving the reason (a bad road crash, perhaps), and suggesting alternative places to seek medical attention. They found patients understanding and their shifts became much less fraught
- An inquisitive member of staff wondered why children having investigations at a hospital imaging department came out crying. She sat down and asked them and discovered that they were frightened of going into a dark room. Now staff leave the lights on until patients are settled. Result—children don't cry, images are better, and throughput is faster
- Instead of playing music, a practice uses the telephone on-hold time to play messages giving information—for example, flu clinic dates and holiday opening times.

### Giving information

Almost every hospital, department, or practice has leaflets and a website. But the information may not achieve its aim.

- A day surgery unit instructed patients to arrive nil by mouth. Many didn't. The author of the leaflet assumed that the jargon was as familiar to patients as it was to staff.



And unless patients are asked, the information may not be what they want to know.

- A hospital asked patients and their visitors what information they wanted. As expected, they asked about duration of stay and parking, but they also wanted to know how they could get hold of a newspaper during their admission and where visitors could get something to eat at a reasonable price.

### Feedback

The hearts of many NHS staff members sink when surveys and complaints are mentioned. But there are many other ways of finding out what patients think. The more informal the comment, the more rewarding it can be to deal with. Grumbles acknowledged early on don't turn into chronic dissatisfaction and complaints.

- General practitioner receptionists noted that a new foreign resident appeared irritated that he could not see the doctor at exactly the time he chose. The practice manager invited the patient to discuss his dissatisfaction. She discovered that he thought the service was private and he would be billed at the end of the quarter. Once he understood about the NHS he was happy to accept the practice's appointments system.

### Patient groups

Patient groups can be a lot of work, but when their remit is clear and their membership appropriate, they can be very productive.

- A hospital department set up a user group to get feedback on patients' experiences and to get their views on new ideas. As a result of patients' comments on waiting times, the booking system for follow-up appointments has been changed. The group has commented on drafts of letters, instructions, and leaflets and joined staff in discussions about diary led follow-up and reducing interruptions to consultations
- Elderly patients visiting their GPs complained that they could not get out of the chairs in the waiting room. The patients participation group helped to choose new chairs and raised the funds
- Implantable defibrillators (ICDs) are relatively new and recipients are often young. Who knows whether it is safe for someone with an ICD to bungee jump? Now patients meet to share their experience, and one contributes his professional expertise by producing a newsletter. It isn't just patients who are benefiting—staff are learning too.

### Patient friendly working: how to get involved

- For further information about patient friendly working and patient friendly accreditation see [www.patientfriendly.org.uk](http://www.patientfriendly.org.uk). It gives examples of patient friendly activities and a demonstration of how evidence is collected
- Patient friendly activities are recorded in an on-line portfolio. A healthcare team in a practice, department, or directorate look together at how they meet a set of criteria covering:
  - why involvement?
  - information to support decision taking
  - creating and acting on feedback involving the wider community
  - the patient's experience
- The portfolio provides evidence of what has been achieved and can be useful for induction of new staff and as evidence for appraisal
- This helps the team see how much they are doing already and means most can meet the baseline assessment and qualify for working towards patient friendly accreditation

Staff may not always have time to give patients the attention they would like, but there are other people willing to help. Patients can give their time, they can share their experiences, and they can contribute their professional resources.

- A patient who is a retired benefits agency worker spends an afternoon a week at a practice helping patients to complete benefit forms.

All staff can contribute to patient friendliness. It isn't just frontline staff who can make a difference; managers walk through their hospital or practice and see patients squirming on uncomfortable chairs and peering at unreadable notices. They can ensure that changes happen and that patients, staff, and the institution reap the benefits.

- A GP practice manager found that the toys disappeared from the waiting room. She discussed the problem with parents and they found a solution. A notice now encourages parents to bring in toys and books they don't want and to take away any that their children would like ... a toy and book exchange was born which is now completely self supporting
- Patient friendly working at one hospital led to staff working together to reduce the wait for surgery from 39 to 13 days.

Thinking in a patient friendly way helps staff to challenge their own assumptions about patients and the system.

- A practice found that mothers and children were missing appointments. Many were single parents and the practice grumbled about them until the health visitors asked the mothers why. They learnt that the buses were driving past the stops if they saw women with pushchairs waiting to board. The practice contacted the bus company, which tackled the issue with the drivers. Vulnerable patients are now able to get to their appointments.

Staff at all levels find a value and a reward in the patient friendly approach.

- "The Patient Friendly Accreditation Scheme has forced me to look at a whole range of issues surrounding the term 'patient friendly.' Are we meeting the needs of the population that we serve? Are we taking on board their comments and suggestions? For example, patients inquired about sending messages to the practice via the internet.

They can now do so. They also asked about booking on-line appointments and we will be implementing this next month." Practice manager

- "Discussing patient involvement helped us get to know each other better, and that has been extremely valuable." Nurse
- "It has given me the confidence to be more challenging. I now feel able to tackle inflexible ways of doing things; to say this is what we should be doing, because it is best practice." Nurse
- "Because the patients are aware of the different stages of treatment this allows them to be more in control and more involved in their care. This also prevents patients repeatedly telephoning the practice asking for further information." GP receptionist
- "Patient friendly working enables everyone on the team to see how important their role is on the patient pathway. What each of us does, and the way that we do it, makes a difference to the emotional as well as the clinical experience of the patient. Acknowledgment of that importance gives personal confidence to confront unacceptable behaviour within staff teams. As good practice is identified it is systemised so that it can be applied consistently ... day in, day out, by the whole team." Consultant, imaging department.

Being patient friendly can help to restore people's faith in the health service.

- "I have been coming to this hospital for twenty years and have never been to such a great open day before." 76 year old patient
- "I am well aware of the amount of work and effort that has gone into the day and it was very interesting and a success. I cannot emphasise how good it is to meet other patients and share experiences." Mother of a 19 year old patient

Patient friendly accreditation (see box) provides an external recognition of achievement, but what is important is the changes made along the way. The patient pathway is too often a maze. Patient friendly practices help to straighten it out.

"If you follow patient centred guidance rather than professional centred guidance you won't go far wrong." Medical mentor

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A toy exchange might stop toys disappearing from the waiting room