



Patient-Centred Care: What it is and how to achieve it

Definitions of Patient-Centred Care

While the term “patient-centred care” has become increasingly more popular over the past few years—catapulted into our health care vernacular from the Institute of Medicine (IOM) program on Quality of Health Care in America—the concept of “patient-centredness” and its study has been around for decades. Further, those who have researched it have consistently found a positive relationship between patient-centredness and health status outcomes.

NRC Picker is well known across the globe for developing surveys and tracking patient experiences. They define patient-centred care as having seven attributes: respect; coordination and integration; communication; physical comfort; emotional support; family and friend involvement; and transition/continuity. **The Change Foundation** in Ontario recently held a series of focus groups to better understand the patient experience. Participants told them patient-centred care comprises the following elements: comprehensiveness; coordination; timeliness; functioning e-health; clear and reliable communication; convenience; respect; empathy and understanding; continuity and stability; and, fairness.(1) **In 2009, the Canadian Medical Association** polled Canadians on whether they thought health care services in their community was patient-centred, using a definition that referred to timely access to a full range of services that met their needs and preferences, and that they are treated with dignity and respect.

As these examples demonstrate, most definitions of patient-centred care do in fact share a lot in common. Improvement guru Dr. **Don Berwick**, from the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (2) cites a number of succinct, useful definitions:

The needs of the patient come first (Mayo Clinic)

Nothing about me without me (Dr. Diane Plaming, UK Health Organizational Sociologist)

Every patient is the only patient (Harvard Community Health Plan Hospital)

Dr. Berwick himself defines patient-centred care as:

The experience (to the extent the informed, individual patient desires it) of transparency, individualization, recognition, respect, dignity, and choice in all matters without exception related to one’s person, circumstances, and relationships in health care.

Sometimes it’s easier to understand what a concept is by thinking about what it is not. Through a recent dialogue with Saskatchewan patients and families, we heard loud and clear where we’re falling short of delivering care focused on the wants and needs of the patient.

Saskatchewan’s Patient First Review

In November 2008, the province of Saskatchewan launched its Patient First Review. What makes it a first-of-its kind approach in Canada is that much of its examination of the health care system was through the eyes of patients.

Over a handful of months in early 2009, the people of Saskatchewan shared with Commissioner Tony Dagnone – through interviews, online submissions, focus groups, and a large telephone survey – their experiences with Saskatchewan’s health care system – the good, the bad, and the ugly. Their words and stories filled the pages of the Commissioner’s final report and ultimately framed his principle recommendation “that the health system make patient- and family-centred care the foundation and principal aim of the Saskatchewan health system, through a broad policy framework to be adopted system wide...”(3)

The remaining 15 recommendations in the Patient First report describe what is required to achieve a truly patient- and family-centred health system. Significant system redesign, along with fundamental culture change, will be essential.

In response to the Commissioner's report, the provincial government announced in the October 2009 Throne Speech its lead-out strategy – the Saskatchewan Surgical Initiative – which is aimed at transforming the patient's surgical experience.

Moving from words to actions

A health care system that truly delivers patient-centred care will require both a significant culture change and substantive system redesign. Some – including Commissioner Dagnone – feel a Charter of Patient Rights and Responsibilities should be developed and implemented to help improve the quality of care. A charter is a safeguard – a good one – but the focus should be on getting it right rather than invoking procedures to intervene when it doesn't. My impression is that there's much more interest in moving the system to being patient-centred, and that there are other more pressing activities that health care leadership should tackle first, including:

- 1. Affirming patient-centredness as a principle dimension of quality.** This means measuring it (comprehensively and continuously) and reporting on it in a very transparent manner. In Saskatchewan, this will mean continuing the dialogue with Saskatchewan people about their health care experiences. The conversation that was started through the Patient First Review cannot be a 'one-time only' phenomenon.
- 2. Setting expectations for the system around patient-centredness and communicating those expectations clearly and frequently to the public.** In Saskatchewan, patients and their families have told us they want a health care system that is markedly different from the one that currently exists; articulating your patient-centred aims signals to citizens that its health system has listened and is going to make changes.
- 3. Giving health care providers (current and upcoming) the tools and confidence to embrace, not fear, a patient-centred health system.**
- 4. Using policy levers to support the transition to a more patient-centred system.** Incentives matter. Understand how current financial incentives align, or do not align, with patient-centred care. (1)

This list of proposed actions is by no means exhaustive. Like many of the definitions of patient-centred care cited earlier, they are deceptively simple on paper. Executing on them, however, will require a level of collective effort and focus that we have not seen in Canadian health care for some time.

(1) Lewis, S. Patient-centred Care: An Introduction to What It Is and How to Achieve it. A Discussion Paper for the Saskatchewan Ministry of Health (2009). <http://www.health.gov.sk.ca/patient-centred>

(2) Berwick, DM. What 'Patient-centred' Should Mean: Confessions of an Extremist. Health Affairs, 28, no. 4 (2009) – Web Exclusive w555-w565. <http://content.healthaffairs.org/cgi/content/abstract/28/4/w555>

(3) Patient First Review Reports. <http://www.health.gov.sk.ca/patient-first-review-documents>

