



Patient survey: Stoughton Hospital ranks high in care

By Autumn Drussell
Associate Editor

When it comes to customer service, clean rooms, quietness and outpatient care, Stoughton Hospital outranked the U.S. national average; proving almost anything other hospitals can do, Stoughton can do better. Those were some of the results stemming from a patient satisfaction survey conducted by the Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS), released to the public March 28. In fact, Stoughton Hospital scored higher than the national average on at least 10 questions, and higher than three Madison hospitals whose patients were also surveyed. The HCAHPS survey was used to collect feedback from patients on their experiences with medical, surgical or maternity care during recent overnight stay in the hospital. The survey allows consumers to make fair and objective comparisons between hospitals, according to the report. All hospitals used in the survey are given the same set of questions. Stoughton's strengths are clearly in customer service, which Kristi Hund, vice president of patient services for Stoughton Hospital, attributes to the hospital's smaller size and emphasis on patient care and satisfaction. Hund said while they are "Pleased" to see how they compare against Madison hospitals, they don't necessarily want to be pitted against them, because there are many specialty services a smaller hospital such as Stoughton simply cannot provide. "But the national averages are telling, too," she said. In terms of providing follow-up care (i.e. information to go home with that is also carefully explained) Stoughton Hospital's patients gave the hospital a 91 percent score - where the national average was only 79 percent. Two Madison hospitals were scored at 85 percent, and the other, at 86 percent.

Stoughton Hospital also received a top score of 74 percent by patients when asked if they always received help as soon as they wanted it, compared with the national average at 60 percent. Two Madison hospitals received scores below the national average at 55 and 59 percent, while a third Madison hospital received a 62 percent score by patients. And if you are hoping to get some "R&R" during a hospital stay - definitely come to Stoughton, where patients scored the hospital at 69 percent - much higher than the national average (54 percent) and three Madison hospitals (45, 62 and 55 percent). "We are always interested in how we look in the eyes of our consumers," said Hund. "Part of the value of a survey like this is that it lets us know how our patients are experiencing our services - and provides us with valuable opportunities to take action." That's exactly what they did three years ago, when, looking to better its customer service, Stoughton Hospital formed the Excellence Together program. In 1993 the hospital decided to revamp its customer service standards by offering staff training. A few years ago they solicited staff interested in helping to improve the hospital's service to become part of a committee. "We were pleasantly surprised with the outcome," said Hund. We got 12 people to come together to identify what we do well at and where we could improve. We wanted to offer 'wow' service instead of settling for good."

From there the focus turned to three vital areas: patient satisfaction, staff satisfaction and physician satisfaction. Each group consisted of 10-12 people, all from different areas of the hospital such as physicians, nurses, administration, therapy and other departments. "The efforts were really wide-spread; we had people from all departments on each team," said Hund. "We recognized there are no stand-alone services."

From there the Excellence Together program was born. "Honestly we would not have looked like this (on the survey) had we not implemented an organization-wide effort to improve," said Hund. In fact at one point, Stoughton was scoring lower than other hospitals in the noise category - a category they now dominate. "We looked at the noise levels around patients' rooms and tried to improve it. We met with staff and found ways we could improve." Unfortunately, she said, caring for patients is a round-the-clock responsibility, which requires doctors and nurses to work even while people are trying to rest. "It's not always restful at a hospital because we are always waking people up to check their blood pressure, for medications, etc. . . . so when they can rest, of course we want them to rest," said Hund. "But the mere activity of providing patient care can sometimes take away from that (restfulness)." Hund said the staff was very receptive and motivated to find ways to make overnight stays at the hospital quieter for patients. "They had fun with it - one (staff member) even brought in a device called a yak track, which monitors the noise level in an area. It blinks when the noise goes above an acceptable range. More than anything it just made people aware of how loud they were being," Hund explained.

And the low survey results provided the staff with a good opportunity to make some changes, and as a result, drastically improve their scores. The hospital doesn't depend solely on the HCAHPS survey for gauging patient satisfaction. They take matters into their own hands, too. "We make the first part the 20 questions from the HCAHPS survey, and the rest we get more in depth with our own, specific questions through (survey company) Press Ganey," Hund explained. They also take phone calls, letters and e-mails from their patients - positive and negative - into consideration.

"We regularly trend those comments," she stressed. One of the most important pieces of the customer service puzzle, though, comes from the hospital employees charged with providing it. "We're blessed with a staff who cares and wants to improve," said Hund. "We are always actively trying to hire people who share our service and patient care values, because service is our culture. "To us, service means not just caring for our patients, but caring about them, too. We recognize there's a strong correlation between employee satisfaction and patient satisfaction." Hund said she doesn't think the HCAHPS survey asks patients anything they shouldn't already expect - things that should apply "no matter what hospital you are at," she stressed. "I think where we can excel is in personalized care. Because we are smaller we can get to know our patients better. Our focus is on quality versus quantity." Health care is traditionally organized around the needs of providers, Hund said, meaning patient perspectives are not always considered. That's why it's important to have critical data from surveys such as the patient satisfaction one from HCAHPS. "This puts the information right in front of us," Hund said, "and we're using it to change our processes." Even though their scores are higher than the Madison hospitals and national average, Hund said they aren't "resting on their laurels." "When we look at this (survey) we're pleased but we still don't have any 100 percents under our name," she said. "Until there is, we'll keep trying. We're not perfect, but we're certainly headed in the right direction."