

Improving care through complaints

Dorset County Hospital NHS Foundation Trust used every complaint as a learning opportunity to support healthcare staff in improving patient experience. Using the NICE guideline and accompanying quality standard on patient experience, the trust categorised and themed complaints to identify areas of poor practice and solutions to improving care.

“Complaints are our early warning signs of things going wrong. By learning from them we can put preventative actions in place before they become serious incidents.”

Sarah Silverton, Patient and Public Experience Lead,
Dorset County Hospital NHS Foundation Trust

Learning from complaints requires a culture shift

Dorset County Hospital NHS Foundation Trust serves a population of approximately 215,000 people. Over a quarter of the local population is of retirement age and frequently access NHS services for management of long-term conditions.

Typically, about half of NHS complaints relate to patient interactions with healthcare staff, and therefore improving patient experience requires a culture shift. The trust's annual complaints report showed the same themes emerging year on year, indicating that learning from complaints was not truly happening.

The culture shift required in the trust therefore was to see every complaint as a learning opportunity. Most complaint letters contain an emotional journey with positive and negative experiences; thus complaints provide an opportunity to recognise good practice as well as improve services.

However, complaint letters can also bring about emotional responses in staff that can lead to defensive attitudes which prevent learning. Using the NICE guidance enabled staff to be more analytical of complaints in order to learn from them.

Ensuring patients are treated with compassion and dignity

The trust used the NICE guideline CG138 on patient experience of adult NHS services, and the accompanying quality standard QS15, to categorise the complaints and identify themes and areas of poor practice.

The trust identified 5 standards which had the most complaints associated with them, before focusing on standard 1 around compassion as the first area to improve. Standard 1 – which corresponds to the 6 Cs of nursing - states that:

“ Patients are treated with dignity, kindness, compassion, courtesy, respect, understanding and honesty.”

The trust executive agreed to make ward sisters supervisory, enabling them to be visible and accessible to the team, patients and visitors and to promote this standard. This allowed them to meet with complainants to discuss their concerns and learning was shared with ward staff. This resulted in a sharp fall in complaints associated with this standard.

A sharp fall in complaints

The trust witnessed a:

- 61% decrease in complaints coded to standard 1 in quarter 3 and this was sustained in quarter 4
- 87.5% fall in the total number of complaints escalated to the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman in 2013/14 compared to the previous year.

All patient feedback, including, Friends & Family Test comments and National NHS Survey Programme comments, are now coded to the NICE quality standard for patient experience.

The trust shared its coding methods with St George's NHS Trust to add to their real time patient feedback system. They also shared their coding methods with a further 8 NHS trusts at The WOW! Awards.

A key learning point recognised by the trust was that identifying emotional journeys through complaints opens up emotions in staff. It is important to make staff aware of how they may feel during the process and ensure that they are supported during and after.