Patient satisfaction with the dental services of an educational institution

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ABSTRACT

Aims: To find out the level of patient satisfaction on the dental services received from the King Khalid University College of Dentistry (KKU/CD) Clinics - Abha, Saudi Arabia. Materials and Method: A questionnaire survey was used consisting of twenty questions which included sociodemographic details, reason/s for attendance, reception, impressions on the clinic environment, waiting times, satisfaction with dental treatment received. Results: Of the 900 questionnaires distributed, 836 (92.8%) were completed and returned within 24 hours of treatment. Respondents were mostly males (75%) and over 85% were under 45 years old. Patients attended primarily for three reasons: routine annual check (27.5%), root canal treatment (23.7%) and tooth restorations (16.5%). Vast majority of patients (80%) were seeing the dentist for the first time and nearly 70% came on the recommendation of a friend. 86% of patients felt anxiety to varying degrees during treatment. Nonetheless, four out of every five patients (81%) were satisfied with quality of treatment provided and follow-up care (85%). Patients (> 87%) were generally satisfied with arrangement of their appointments. Conclusion: In conclusion patients were satisfied in most of the areas investigated. There is a need for avoidance of delays before commencement of treatment and reducing patient’s anxiety during treatment.

Key words: Patient satisfaction; Dental treatment; Dental school

Introduction

Patient satisfaction is one of the key determinants of success in any health care enterprise. Its assessment has therefore become an important activity of health institutions. Satisfaction is an attitudinal response to value judgments which patients make about their clinical experience.¹ This is at present used to evaluate the quality of care,² identify which aspects of a service need to be changed to improve patient satisfaction,³ assist health providers in identifying consumers likely to disenroll⁴ and compare different health care programs or systems. Patients continue to demand excellence in the level of dental care offered and a demand considered quite reasonable and legitimate by all stake-holders. Funders of oral health care therefore expect the dental team to continually evolve ways of achieving this important goal. A happy patient is very likely to return for future care and also to encourage others to patronize the healthcare facility.⁵

In recent years, patient satisfaction has emerged as a key component and measure of the quality of care.⁶ Patient satisfaction is now a key concern of quality assurance and an expected outcome of health care.⁷

Patient satisfaction or dissatisfaction is a complicated phenomenon which may be closely associated with patient expectations, health status, and personal characteristics in addition to health system uniqueness.⁸ Systematic feedback should ideally be gathered before patients leave the dental clinic. This ensures that information is obtained while it is still fresh in the patient’s mind⁹ and, at the same time, may help to avoid service failure if a problem with quality is discovered. Unfortunately, too few organizations ever gather such information until a service disaster actually occurs.¹⁰ Of the methods used to explore patients’ views for improvement of health care,¹¹ the commonest are structured survey questionnaires and patient interviews. Apart from teaching and research, the mission of the King Khalid University College of Dentistry (KKU/CD) is to provide excellent dental services to patients seen at its clinics. Establishing and sustaining quality health care requires continuous evaluation of all aspects of our dental services. This satisfaction survey is one of the several tools currently in use to assess the quality of care offered patients at our clinics. The purpose of this survey is to find out the level of patients’ satisfaction with dental services received at the KKU College of Dentistry Clinics.

Materials and Method

In February 2010, the KKU/CD commissioned a questionnaire survey of patients attending its clinics primarily to find out the level of satisfaction with the dental services received. The Ethics Committee of the College approved the project. Twenty questions and topics were included in the questionnaire, including general information about the patient, reason/s for attendance, reception, impressions on the clinic environment, waiting times, satisfaction with dental treatment received. Adult patients seeking treatment at the KKU College of Dentistry were requested to complete the questionnaire following their treatment session. Those who volunteered to participate in the survey were asked to read the instructions carefully and respond as best as they could to the questions. Of the 900 questionnaires distributed, 836 (92.8%) were completed and returned within 24 hours of treatment. The collected data was analyzed using SPSS v.16.
Results
A total of 900 questionnaires were distributed among the sample population. Within 24 hours of treatment, 836 (92.8%) were returned completed. The socio-demographic distribution of the study population was tabulated in Graph 1.

Graph 1: Graph showing Patients’ Characteristics

Respondents were mostly males (75%) with a minority of females (25%). The vast majority (85%) of the population for this study were under 45 years old. 15% were above 45 years in age.

Reason/s for Attendance, First Time Callers and Why KKU-Clinics?
Routine annual check was the commonest reason for attendance (27.5%) followed by root canal treatment (23.7%) and tooth restorations (16.5%). All other reasons, including prosthetics, oral surgery and periodontics constituted only 32%. The vast majority of patients (80%) were attending for the first time. Nearly 70% came to the KKU College of Dentistry on the recommendation of a friend (Graph 2).

Graph 2: Patients opinion on reason for attendance, number of first time callers and why KKU/DC

Most patients (65%) located College clinics without difficulty nearly half (48%) experienced some difficulty with finding parking places for their vehicles. Only 65.5% of patients kept their appointments (Graph 3).

Graph 3: Patients response on clinic reception area.

Virtually all patients (99.3%) rated the Clinic Reception area was good to excellent in terms how comfortable it was. Cleanliness was also rated very highly (91%). Receptionists were adjudged fast, efficient and helpful (82.4%). Patients (> 87%) were generally satisfied with arrangement of their appointments, actual reception, attitude of reception staff. Over a third of patients experienced 10-20 minute delays before actual treatment (Graph 4).

Graph 4: Patient response on access and parking facility at dental clinic, waiting time.

Graph 5: Patient satisfaction with treatment, attitude of dentist, quality of the treatment, and anxiety at treatment.
86% of patients felt anxiety to varying degrees during treatment. 56% were able to endure the discomfort for the duration of treatment whilst 30% said it was unbearable. Nonetheless, four out of every five patients (81%) were satisfied with quality of treatment provided. Four out of every five patients (85%) were satisfied with their follow-up care. Only 14% felt this was poor to fair. Over half the population of respondents (51%) would like to be treated by interns as against 19% who preferred students. 30% of respondents had no preference (Graph 5).

Discussion
Patient satisfaction was defined as “...the reaction of the recipient of medical (or dental treatment) to important aspects of the service that he has recourse to and become familiar with”.

It has been used as a tool for assessing quality of care both at the level of individual health professional and for health care programs. Factors associated with patient's satisfaction are not fully understood. It is not only a function of the physician and the objective care provided but is also influenced to some degree by patient-specific characteristics. Patient's satisfaction is perhaps determined by several factors including adherence to treatment, loyalty to a service provider, reduced medico-legal risk, age, unmet expectations, doctor-patient communication, health outcome, pain severity, timing of assessment and patient's emotional and mental state.

Patient satisfaction studies are frequently carried out in health services throughout the world. Respondents to this survey were mostly males (75%) with a minority of females (25%). The vast majority (85%) of the total study population was under 45 years old. 15% were above 45 years in age. These features partly reflect the present nature of the Saudi society which has a predominantly young population with an almost equal male: female ratio. The low representation of females can perhaps be explained by the fact that the relatively new College of Dentistry is located on the outskirts of Abha town and that females, at least for now, tend to visit nearby primary health centers for routine dental check and treatment.

Two out of every three subjects of this survey were aged between 15-35 years. It was therefore no surprise that they came primarily for routine dental check, fillings and root canal treatment. These three items constituted 76.1% of all reasons why patients came to the KKU dental clinics. Studies over the past two decades have shown that dental caries incidence in Saudi Arabia is quite high. The demand for root canal treatment is correspondingly high due to damage by dental caries and trauma to anterior teeth. Prior to seeking treatment, these patients must have suffered pain and great discomfort from their ailments. Patient satisfaction for this category of patients is therefore likely to be influenced by the quality of communication, patient’s and patient’s perception of friendliness as well as instructions given to patients. Quality of general information and explanations of procedures and investigations carried out in the course of treatment as well as patient’s appraisal of friendliness of healthcare team members are important indicators and determinant of patient’s satisfaction. The importance of effective communication skills has been repeatedly stressed by researchers. It might be as important to ensure that patient feels heard and cared for as it is to provide expert dental care.

It is pertinent to note that the vast majority of patients (80%) were attending for the first time and that nearly 70% came to the KKU College of Dentistry on the recommendation of a friend. These are to be expected because the KKU College of Dentistry moved into its present location a little over two years ago. The importance of patient’s satisfaction must therefore be given high priority by the College and all operatives of its dental clinics. A happy patient is very likely to return for future care and also to encourage others to patronise the healthcare facility. Publicity from person to person within the community is perhaps the most effective means of gaining acceptance and high patronage by members of society, near and far.

Perhaps more effort is needed to facilitate locating the KKU Dental Clinics and providing parking spaces for patients’ vehicles. Only 65% of patients located College clinics without difficulty whilst half (48%) experienced some difficulty with finding parking spaces for their vehicles. The fact that only 65.5% of patients kept their appointments also points at the necessity for finding out why one out every three patients failed to keep their appointments. The present study did not anticipate this finding and therefore made no provisions for elucidating reasons for such a high level of default by patients.

In terms of patients’ experience at KKU Dental Clinics, it is re-assuring to observe that virtually all patients (99.3% & 91% respectively) rated the Clinic Reception area good to excellent as far as comfort and cleanliness were concerned. All participating patients were generally satisfied with arrangement of their appointments. Receptionists were adjudged fast, efficient and helpful (82.4%). Patients (100%) were generally satisfied with arrangement of appointments, actual reception, and attitude of reception staff.

The striking point of weakness, as perceived by patients, lied in their experience of delays in being offered treatment. Over a third of patients experienced 10-20 minute delays before actual treatment. Research has shown that a key predictor of patient’s satisfaction with their care is wait times. Other predictors include staff etiquette, clear communication and instructions, availability of diagnostic tests and professional competency. Patient’s satisfaction can be greatly increased by care process interventions directed at starting the care process earlier, letting patients know in advance approximate duration of treatment (keeping to treatment times!) and gainfully occupying patient’s time during the waiting period. KU clinics already has a few public enlightenment videos to educate patients whilst waiting for treatment More resources may need to be invested in this area to enhance patient satisfaction.
With such a high proportion of patients attending the dental clinic for the very first time, it is understandable that 86% of patients felt anxiety to varying degrees during treatment. To improve patients’ satisfaction, more attention needs to be devoted to easing patients’ anxiety during treatment. This is all the more important because most of the patients attending KKU dental clinics might be coming into contact with clinical dentistry for the very first time. A positive lasting impression would therefore enhance their over-all satisfaction, encouraging them to come again and also invite their friends to undergo routine dental checks and dental treatment. Nonetheless, majority of patients (81%) reported satisfaction with the quality of dental treatment and with the follow-up care (85%).

Conclusion
The vast majority of the patients seen in this dental facility were below the age of 35 years, reflecting the demographic nature of Abha’s population and of Saudi Arabia at large. Patients were satisfied in most of the areas investigated. Much improvement is required in reducing patient’s anxiety during treatment as most of the patients coming to this facility are seeing the dentist for the very first time. Finally, the delays before commencement of treatment and the cause/s of patients coming late for appointment need to be elucidated in a further study.

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