

THE SERVICE DIALOGUE

Tick Tock, Tick Tock.....The Waiting Game!

*'Apprehension, uncertainty, waiting, expectation, fear of surprise,
do a patient more harm than any exertion'*

Florence Nightingale 1860

As the year draws to an end, many of find ourselves remembering what we should have done during the year like check our health status. We may have started the year with resolutions that we would hit the gym, eat healthy and so on and so forth, but most of us have not kept those resolutions past the days following said resolutions. What does this have to do with customer service you ask? Well, a lot. As a result of us not taking care of our bodies the way we continually promise, we will end up in the doctor's office every now and then with one complaint after the other. We then find ourselves facing the long lines in the waiting room while the doctor attends to another patient, all the while wondering if you are not catching what the patient seated next to you has. Illness is never planned for, and while sitting next to the patient who might transmit their illness to you, you are normally thinking about the wait, and whether you will die during the wait, it always seems so long, and the 10% you have to pay after that (if you have Medical Aid that is!) and whether the insurance will pay for some of the services that you have to consume.

FOR BETTER OR WORSE?

The doctor's waiting room with the outdated magazines (am I the only one who notices that the reading material in most doctors offices is outdated and often torn?) and the waiting time is not conducive to making one feel better. Instead I find that I often have time to realize that I also have this and that other illness that I would not otherwise have noticed before I went into the doctor's office. Although one may have set an appointment it often happens that they are not attended to during the time agreed. They say "patience is a virtue", however, when one has to wait longer than 30 minutes without an explanation as to why they are waiting or reassurances that they will soon be attended to, then patience no longer becomes a virtue. Granted, time with a doctor cannot be given a set time limit because as patients we vary, however, when we ask for appointments should the appointment not be set after the average time a patient spends with the doctor? It should be understood that when one is ill, they most often take time (and sometimes steal it) away from work to run to the doctor's office thinking it will take at least an hour .

There was a time when I made the mistake of thinking like that. I set an appointment three months in advance, and when the day came, took a few hours from work to go and see the doctor. When I arrived there I was informed that the doctor was with a patient at the hospital but would be back within an hour. I was asked to go and come back. After that hour I was back at the doctor's office, and the same patients who I had found earlier were still waiting "patiently" for the doctor to assist them. I took a seat and waited as well and less than ten minutes later the "famous doctor" walked a patient out. When the nurse handed him two files, mine amongst them, he belligerently asked the nurse why she was handing him more files when he was on his way to the hospital. Embarrassed, the nurse took back the files and asked him when he would be back, to which he responded that he did not know and that the patients could wait but he could not promise anything. I sat there for the next five minutes and wondered if as patients we allow ourselves to be treated in that manner. I looked around and the women I had found waiting looked as if they were going to wait for the doctor to come back. After a further five minutes I left, and went to look for another doctor.

It is then that I realized that as patients we out of loyalty to our Doctors accept whatever it is that they do without questioning, nor asking. Yes doctors are responsible for making us better and they need to know our history. On the other hand we also have to be accountable as to whom we choose and why we choose them. Asking around about a prospective doctor is an investment in your health and will serve you better than a new year's resolution. When our cars need service, we are most likely to shop around for a good garage or mechanic and even interview them before engaging them. Even when hiring a prospective employee, we take them through a vigorous interview process to make sure that they will be able to fulfill their obligations to the organization, why then can the same not be applied to our health?

Adults and children have died in hospitals and clinics because improper and inadequate attention was given. Many people are aware of the witness accounts of family members whose loved one was ignored and died while waiting for care that could have prevented the patient from dying.

Then Comes Paying and Paying All The Time!

As mentioned above, illness is never planned, and when you do fall ill, it is often during times when you do not have the money to pay for the previously mentioned 10% that results from visiting the good doctor. The laboratory, x rays and so forth will also dip into your pocket, and if you then also have to follow up with physiotherapy, well then you may be in debt for the next five years. Although this seems extreme, it has happened and continues to happen, I have friends who have had to use all their savings and had to start saving from scratch because of the extended hospital stays, and other procedures that are not covered by their Medical Aid. Hospitals complain that the overwhelming costs to provide care for the uninsured and underinsured has caused the disconnect that has created these "isolated situations." These are not isolated situations. People have died while employees took a break; they subjectively choose not to help a patient in obvious distress, and relatives or friends witness the casual conversations that can be heard while patients lay waiting for care.

The dialogue continues...this time I refuse to see the other side of the story!

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