

Providing Patients With a Voice: The Importance of Patient Advocacy

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Abstract

Within a healthcare facility, each and every person or patient that receives medical care is deserving of care, as well as certain rights and standards of that care. Throughout the healthcare field as a whole, there is a wide variety of types and settings through which medical care is provided, as well as numerous patients who receive treatment and care. Many patients do not receive the care that is up to the standard they legally deserve, and the lack and representation of patient advocates in the healthcare field can prevent facilities from recognizing these issues, as well as coming to a resolution. Patients of all ages, including children, encounter this obstacle regularly and under various circumstances. Each person and each patient requires unique and personalized treatment and deserve to be fully informed about what they are encountering and navigating. The term “patient-centered care” begins from the moment a patient is seeking care as well as each step of the way throughout the process. After speaking with patient representatives, healthcare administrators, and uncovering the role of patient advocates, as well lack of recognition and resources, awareness and education are imperative. Patients need a voice, and the resources to give them one should be made readily available.

Patient Rights

Across the United States, there are a wide variety of healthcare facilities that offer care based on the needs and requirements of different patients. These healthcare facilities provide care in mental health, physical rehabilitation, acute, inpatient and outpatient, and much more. Many facilities promise patient-centered, respectful, and the utmost form of care no matter what their race, religion, or orientation. The question then arises of whether or not these promises are being kept and ensured. Even if a hospital does provide the opportunity to file a patient complaint if these promises are not being upheld, it is imperative that someone ensure that these issues are resolved and necessary changes are made. There are specific rules and regulations that medical and healthcare facilities are required to adhere to in order to ensure each patient is not only treated, but done so with respect, attention, and care as well as provided with equal attention and options. According to the American Medical Association, each patient in a healthcare setting has the right “To courtesy, respect, dignity, and timely, responsive attention to his or her needs,” as well as the right to be fully informed of their diagnosis and treatment plan. (AMA ***). Under certain circumstances, some may not be aware of these rights that they have as a patient or a person seeking care. Patients may also not be fully aware of what their diagnosis entails or understand their treatment plan and options for courses of action. Patients may also have experienced mistreatment or lack thereof from a Physician or healthcare worker. Under these circumstances, a patient advocate comes into play through providing patients with a voice, and helping to create a safe, just, and ethical healthcare facility.

Patient advocates not only provide face-to-face interaction so patients can feel heard and understood as they voice their concerns, but also a specific person who is assigned the duties of

taking account of the issues and understanding the most respectful way for the patient and most effective way for the facility to resolve the issue.

Patient Advocates

In order for healthcare facilities to function effectively, it's imperative that one or more people understand some of the issues that might be present, and have the knowledge and understanding to resolve these issues. In terms of health care, knowledge and understanding of both the patient and members of the treatment team are fully informed and have an open line of communication. A patient advocate allows for patients to not only become fully informed of the knowledge that is necessary in order to make an informed decision, but I can also provide a comfortable avenue to express frustrations in an effective way to solve issues as they see fit. Patient Advocates provide the power to give each person that seeks medical care, treatment in a way that works for them. Their duties include keeping patients informed, Advocating for a patient's right, giving patients a voice, helping patients make informed decisions about their care, addressing and helping to resolve issues that threaten patients rights when treated unequally or unfairly, and acting as a bridge between patient and treatment team to allow for open communication on both ends for fair and efficient care.

There are many obstacles that have been presented in the field of patient advocacy not only in terms of patients being made aware of their rights and the potential to be advocated for, but also in terms of representation for patient advocates overall. According to one study that analyzed patient advocates and the numerous roles and responsibilities they have, also included advocate identified barriers for effective performance of their job and duties, including, “negative attitudes from staff members, lack of resources, lack of time, lack of power and

authority, institutional bureaucracy and politics, and lack of managerial accountability,” (Charters, 1993). So much of healthcare facilities procedures and changes come from people in power in the facility, so making those people aware of the issues at hand is the first step towards change. One aspect of advocating for patient representatives is that the data that reflects the influence they have is not always quantitative and “the impact of their contributions is difficult to measure,” (Hult et al., 2021). This means that demonstrating how important or influential a patient advocate can be to a chief executive or financial manager in a healthcare facility can be difficult, as many of the decisions that are made, are done so based on quantitative data, and bring about success for the facility or organization. One important part about raising awareness for patient advocates and the impact that they have is beginning discussions and recognizing the power of word of mouth. Beginning discussions within a healthcare facility among staff and them being able to recognize issues and inconsistencies can help to build a foundation for moving towards a solution to provide greater patient-centered care. Word of mouth is also effective in terms of patient grievances, as patients who are not well educated on their diagnosis or treatment plan, and who may not feel as if they are receiving the care and attention they deserve have the power to share that information with others and impact a healthcare facility's reputation. The presence of a patient advocate can provide an avenue for people to be fully informed of their diagnosis and treatment plan, address concerns and grievances, and have a specific and reliable staff member and physical person whose purpose is to make sure patients remain the focus.

Advocating For Children

Navigating the healthcare world as an educated and informed adult can even be a difficult and frustrating experience, as a person may not have the same specific knowledge or

understanding that their Healthcare professional has. Navigating the healthcare world as a child who may not have the knowledge and understanding, as well as the ability to make an informed decision can be intimidating. Under many circumstances, children have a responsible adult to ask and answer questions, and aid in making informed decisions. In certain situations, it is beneficial for a child to understand what is happening to them and why. Advocating for children means “developing a commitment to a policy of advocacy for a healthy lifestyle in children and young people and for the protection of their rights” (Watersoon & Haroon, 2008). Thinking about things from a different perspective is imperative under the present circumstances, and putting oneself in a child’s shoes, or even recalling memories from childhood can be beneficial. The world is still unfamiliar, with strange adults speaking in foreign terms, in an unfamiliar environment. There are many children who have responsible and experienced adults in their life, such as parents, who can devote time and attention to asking questions, becoming educated, and ensuring their children receive the utmost care and attention they deserve. Children in the foster care system do not have that privilege. They experience all of the same emotions and fears as every other child, but without a consistent adult to rely on who can devote the same time and attention to that child as a parent or guardian would. The care of a child not only takes into consideration the overall and physical well being of the child, but also, “mental health, environment, education and social circumstances” which all can impact one another (Waterson, 2002). A child who is a part of the foster care system may lack stability in these other areas of their life, such as social circumstances or mental health as a result of their situation. In these cases, it is incredibly imperative that there is understanding and even a small sense of control as a component of their treatment plan.

Speaking From Experience

Understanding the issue from several perspectives is crucial to understanding the foundational issues and where they stem from. Many people have had negative experiences one time or another in a healthcare setting. On the other hand, fewer people have seen said issues time after time, recognize the issue, and are familiar with the lack of representation and awareness. Understanding several different perspectives can be a key part of understanding the root of the issue to help build a foundation in order to work towards resolving certain issues and making strides towards patient-centered care across the board.

L. Borchers has been a patient advocate in a surgical hospital for 9 months, and has over 7 years of experience in the healthcare field working various jobs, providing her with a wide range and immense number of patient advocacy issues. Borchers agreed to contribute and answer questions about patient advocacy, and provided a valuable perspective. When asked what she thought was the most prominent obstacle patients face in resolving their concerns, Borchers wrote “Lack of education and comprehension of the information the patient is given,” (L. Borchers, personal communication, April 26, 2022). In order for patients to make informed decisions about their treatment, ensuring patient-centered care, patients should fully understand the medical information they are provided with, and should be educated if they do not. It is imperative to comprehend information in order to make an informed decision. Borchers was also asked to express thoughts on whether or not patients have equal access to a patient advocate and understand their patient rights, and the belief was expressed that they do not in order to prevent hospitals from educating their patients “so the patient is unaware of the “fine lines.”,” as well as “a severe need for better healthcare education for patients and their rights,” (L. Borchers, personal communication, April 26, 2022). Lastly, when asked about the benefits of a patient advocate, Borchers stated that an advocate “provides a non-intrusive environment for the patient

to come to an informed decision safely,” as healthcare in general and medical knowledge can be difficult to understand and make decisions about, and many healthcare facilities have different processes and courses of action that can be complicated to navigate without prior knowledge (L. Borchers, personal communication, April 26, 2022).

Solutions

Awareness can be an extremely beneficial first step in providing patients with a voice. Making people such as hospital administrators or healthcare chief executive officers and financial management aware of the benefits of a patient advocate from the perspective of a healthcare facility and a patient can be immensely effective. Informing hospitals and healthcare facilities of the benefits of a patient advocate. Starting simple can be a possible way to get people’s attention and bring about education and awareness to the issues that are currently present in the healthcare world. Making sure that people understand their rights as a patient, and how this issue applies to them can implement a move towards change. A flier is simple and won’t make an immense impact, but it can be a way to locally raise awareness, begin to educate, and at the very least catch people’s attention and start a discussion. A great deal of change can come from the inside. The first steps of change can also start in the classroom for people pursuing a career in the healthcare field who may encounter this issue on a daily basis. Making patient advocacy a part of education for people entering the healthcare field can be extremely beneficial as many of them encounter patients on a daily basis and be first hand witnesses to unfair treatment or patients unable to make informed decisions. If healthcare and essential workers are made known of how beneficial patient advocacy and overall satisfaction is for not only the patient but also for the reputation and the success of the facility can help to build a strong foundation for increasing the amount of patients who are provided with a voice. Patient-

centered care is a vital aspect of healthcare, and communication fosters a strong foundation for health, well-being, and success.


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GIVE PATIENTS A VOICE

What is a patient advocate and why are they important?

Have you ever been to the Doctor?
(or a hospital or any healthcare facility)



**YOU
HAVE
RIGHTS!**

Scan this QR code to read about **YOUR** rights as a patient from the American Medical Association

Do you work in healthcare?

Have you seen one or more situations in which a patient could have benefitted from more information about their treatment or rights as a patient and someone to advocate for them?

That is what a **PATIENT ADVOCATE** is for!!

- Keeping patients informed
- Advocating for a patient's rights
- Giving patients a voice
- Helping patients make informed decisions about their care
- Addressing and helping to RESOLVE issues that threaten patients rights when treated unequally or unfairly

What Can I Do?

Next time you visit the Doctor or a healthcare facility, **ask questions!** Ask about what their policy is to resolve issues, provide patients with education in terms of their care, and advocacy for patients who can't do so for themselves!

If you work in healthcare, **start discussions.** If you have a patient advocate you can raise awareness and provide resources, and if not, you can inform your supervisors of the importance of patient advocacy for patients and your facility!