

Optimizing Patient Experiences: Key Strategies to Improve HCAHPS Scores

Zalan Shah BS¹ and Farzana Hoque^{2*}

¹Saint Louis University School of Medicine, St. Louis, MO, USA

²Associate Professor of Medicine, Saint Louis University School of Medicine, St. Louis, MO, USA

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***Corresponding author:** Farzana Hoque M.D., MRCP, FACP, FRCP. ²Associate Professor of Medicine, Saint Louis University School of Medicine, St. Louis, MO, USA, Email: farzanahoquemd@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) scores evaluate patient experiences and satisfaction in healthcare facilities. In addition to providing valuable feedback from patients, the survey also impacts Medicare reimbursement rates. Our article explores three intervention strategies associated with or that have been found to improve HCAHPS scores: improving staff satisfaction, enhancing patient communication, and optimizing the hospital environment. Findings indicate that interventions targeting staff satisfaction, which include supportive work environments and effective leadership, are correlated with increased patient satisfaction. Moreover, initiatives focusing on patient communication, such as training healthcare workers and implementing communication strategies, demonstrate significant improvements in patient satisfaction metrics. Additionally, interventions that address the hospital environment, including patient-centered design features and cleanliness initiatives, positively influence HCAHPS scores related to the hospital environment.

Keywords: HCAHPS scores, Patient experience, Communication, Hospital environment, Patient-centered care, Healthcare

1. Introduction

The Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) survey was implemented to provide data directly from patients that assesses health care quality as a part of a national movement towards patient centered care in 2006¹. The HCAHPS survey consists of 29 questions directed towards discharged patients. These questions aim to cover key domains such as communication with healthcare professionals, staff responsiveness, cleanliness and quietness of the hospital environment, medication communication, discharge information, overall hospital rating, and willingness to recommend the hospital. Additionally, the survey includes items to guide patients through relevant questions, adjust for patient mix across hospitals, and support mandated reports. These questions are given to a random sample of adult patients

of the hospital². This survey not only provides invaluable data for assessing patient experience and satisfaction in hospitals but also incentivizes hospitals to prioritize positive patient feedback. Legislation from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services established financial incentives to value patient experiences, measured with scores from the HCAHPS survey, to decide reimbursement levels for patient populations across all U.S. hospital². Hospitals rated in the top third stand to have higher Medicare reimbursement rates, and hospitals in the bottom third have reimbursement partially withheld. HCAHPS scores represented 25% of the total funds withheld annually by CMS, amounting to \$2 billion in 2020³. As a measure of patient satisfaction and care quality, understanding the factors and strategies associated with higher HCAHPS scores is essential for policy makers, healthcare administrators, and hospital staff

seeking to improve patient experiences and enhance healthcare delivery. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate methods correlated with or implemented to raise Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS) scores by examining existing literature and empirical evidence. It is important to differentiate between patient experience and patient satisfaction. While they are related concepts, they refer to distinct metrics. Patient experience describes relationship-center care activities, and patient satisfaction to the patient's perception of the care they receive. Patient experience is less prone to bias and confounding variables⁴.

2. Key Strategies

The following key strategies are crucial for enhancing HCAHPS scores: interventions to improve staff satisfaction and feedback, patient communication, and hospital environment for patients. These findings outline approaches healthcare organizations can adopt to elevate patient experiences to improve HCAHPS scores.

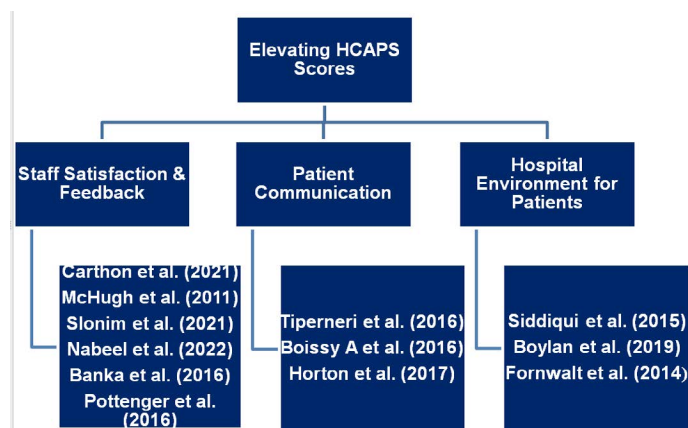


Figure 1: Overview of findings to elevate HCAPS scores.

3. Staff Satisfaction and Feedback

The entire healthcare team all plays a role in the patient's experience. Nurses, specifically, have been demonstrated to have a significant impact on HCAHPS scores. A study conducted by⁵ which categorized 463 hospitals across 4 states by burnout rates and focused on the HCAHPS survey questions of overall hospital rating and likelihood to recommend hospitals as a measure of patient satisfaction⁵. Overall, they found that hospitals with poor work environments had higher burnout rates and lower HCAHPS scores for patient satisfaction, and they recommended investing to improve work environments for nurses to raise patient satisfaction scores. Another study analyzing the same survey data of the 463 hospitals was conducted by McHugh et al found that the percentage of patients who would recommend the hospital to friends or family on the HCAHPS survey decreased by about 2 percent for every 10 percent of nurses at the hospital reporting dissatisfaction with their job⁶. This demonstrates a strong connection between patient satisfaction with the hospital and the job satisfaction of the nursing staff.

Hospital leadership can be a large contributor to the work environment for the hospital staff. Some feel physician CEOs are more effective at managing hospitals due to their clinical experience and medical knowledge. One study found that physician-led hospitals had significantly higher recommended hospital ratings, overall hospital rating, care transition, discharge information, and pain management rating on the HCAHPS survey⁷. This demonstrates when hospitals were led by leaders

with medical backgrounds, HCAHPS scores improved. Overall, this providence evidence that hospital leadership can affect patient experience and satisfaction. Impact of effective leadership was also demonstrated by a prospective study done in the Sparrow-MSU academic teaching hospital. This study found that increasing the frequency of feedback given to residents by physicians increased overall hospital HCAHPS ratings and physician communication scores, further demonstrating how improving the work environment can boost HCAHPS scores⁸. Instant feedback to healthcare staff utilized as an intervention to improve HCAHPS scores was supported by multiple studies. At the Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center, patients seen by internal medicine residents were surveyed upon discharge with in-house surveys. The feedback from these surveys were swiftly shared with the resident physicians, and every month three residents were recognized by the department based on high satisfaction from these survey result⁹. This intervention which involved both expedited feedback and rewarding hospital staff significantly improved the HCAHPS survey responses to all three questions related to physicians. Another study conducted by Sibley Hospital of Washington, DC. utilized similar methods. They formed teams who met weekly to discuss goals and barriers, review metric data such as HCAHPS scores and survey comments, and shared their findings with department leaders. This resulted in many survey responses becoming more positive, including a 9.3% increase in patients who would recommend the hospital to friends and family post-intervention¹⁰. Overall, All three of these studies found that timely feedback to hospitals was effective in raising HCAHPS scores.

4. Patient Communication

Improving communication as an intervention to raise HCAHPS scores was most strongly supported by evidence in the literature. A narrative review of 58 articles completed by Hurwitz evaluated communication, healthcare environment, nursing, and communication technologies as interventions to increase HCAHPS patient experience scores. They found communication was the best supported intervention by multiple studies to increase HCAHPS patient experience scores⁴. A study done by Monmouth Medical Center demonstrated the impact of patient communication on HCAHPS scores. By having hospital staff trained in the AIDET method (Acknowledge, Introduce, Duration, Explain, Thank you) when communicating with patients and implementing in afternoon rounds to increase information provided from the physician to the patient, the hospital was able to raise their "Communication with doctor" HCAHPS scores from 8% percentile rank to 78% in 6 months¹¹. A similar study also demonstrated the effectiveness of physician training for improving HCAHPS scores. The study had 1,537 physicians participate in an 8-hr interactive practice session to learn the relationship-centered model for healthcare, and it was found this session significantly increased the "Respect" HCAHPS scores compared to a control group who did not attend the session¹². Another study conducted by University of Utah Health Care implemented weekly meetings led by physician champions to educate hospitalists on current communication strategies. This intervention resulted in a significant increase of patients answering "Always" to the three questions that asked how often doctors could explain in ways the patient understood, how often did doctors listen carefully to the patient, and how often were patients treated with courtesy and respect¹³. All three of these studies exemplify the effectiveness of educating healthcare workers in communication skills to improve HCAHPS scores.

5. Hospital Environment for Patients

The environment of the hospital also plays a meaningful role in the overall patient experience. Like hospital communication and staff, HCAHPS has questions about the hospital environment on its survey. Therefore, considering the hospital environment is crucial when trying to improve HCAHPS scores. Patient centered designing of hospitals has been developed as a method that can improve patient experience and satisfaction. A hospital was constructed with a patient-centered design including access to healing gardens, a collection of art, well-lit and sound-absorbing patient rooms, and other patient centered design elements. Comparing patient feedback from before and after transitioning to the new hospital, the new hospital had higher HCAHPS scores for both hospital environment and overall rating¹⁴. Another study compared their HCAHPS ratings from patients who were randomly assigned to stay in private rooms to those who stayed in double-occupancy rooms post-surgery. They found patients who stayed in private rooms were significantly more likely to rate the highest scores for overall hospital rating on the HCAHPS survey and were significantly more likely to recommend the hospital to friends and family¹⁵. This study is unique in that the intervention and control groups were studied at the same time and at the same institution and provides compelling evidence of private rooms increasing HCAHPS scores. Cleanliness is a question included on the HCAHPS survey to gauge patient environment. One hospital implemented a Pulsed Xenon Ultraviolet (PX-UV) cleaning system which uses high intensity ultraviolet light to kill bacteria and viruses. Post-implementation of PX-UV, HCAHPS scores for both cleanliness and overall hospital ratings increased. Notably, this increase was enough to increase hospital reimbursements¹⁶. These studies have shown that interventions to adopt patient-centered design and increase hospital cleanliness raised HCAHPS scores for questions pertaining to hospital environment and overall hospital rating.

6. Conclusion

In summary, this article identifies three critical intervention categories to enhance HCAHPS scores and patient experiences in healthcare settings. It demonstrates that initiatives focusing on staff satisfaction, such as supportive work environments and effective leadership, are essential for improving patient perceptions and HCAHPS scores. Additionally, training healthcare workers in effective communication strategies significantly enhances patient-provider interactions and patient satisfaction metrics. Patient-centered design and cleanliness in the hospital environment significantly improve HCAHPS scores. Implementing these measures can markedly improve patient experiences and support patient-centered care in line with current healthcare standards. However, further prospective, and randomized-controlled studies are needed to verify the effectiveness of these interventions in boosting patient experiences and HCAHPS scores.

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7. References

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