



## Role of Public Relations as a Major Tool of Enhancing Patient Communication in the Direction of Effective Health Communication

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### ABSTRACT

*A hospital is a multifaceted institution rendering health services, which is an important service delivered to the patients and so it is quite natural that every aspect of its functioning has an impact on its Public Image. Hospital being a Health care service organization, finds itself very difficult to satisfy its target stakeholders, specially patients since service is something very intangible and as such people can have different perceptions regarding the service quality.*

*To analyze how the function of Public Relations act as a major tool of enhancing Patient Communication by employing various communication strategies and tools, the paper makes a primary research work in the area on the basis of surveying patients and seeking their opinion about whether they feel that Public Relations Manager of a hospital plays an important role as a strong medium of disseminating timely and accurate Health related Communication acting as tool of Patient Communication.*

**KEYWORDS : Public Relations, Patient Communication, Public Image, Strategies**

### Introduction

A hospital being a multifaceted or multi-disciplinary institution finds it very difficult to satisfy its target stakeholders, specially patients since service is something very intangible and as such people can have different viewpoints or perceptions regarding the service quality as per their information about the hospital and their personal experiences. In that case disseminating right information to them in the right manner and by using the right communication channel is the responsibility of the Public Relations Manager. As competition increased in the health care industry the need for an efficient Public Relations Department to handle all kinds of communication with the internal and external publics of the organization also increased.

### Outline:

#### **Role of Public Relations as a tool of Patient Communication**

Public Relations department has become one of the most significant and indispensable department in a hospital due to its diverse services:

Establishes sound communications network by communicating about various issues concerning hospital and thus supervising staff members and at the same time monitoring and controlling all internal and external communications work process of a hospital, specially handling **patient communication** and patient's problems and issues.

Develops and implements various community outreach programmes and special events to to **communicate with the community** at large

Working cooperatively with media and through them to provide the public, specially the patients with **important information** about the quality of services of the hospital

Generating publicity through cordial media relations for all major events involving the hospital.

Managing the successful Planning and Execution of Hospital's special events.

Taking care of and providing very **Specialized and Professional Publications, Editing and Design Service** for all Hospital departments like staff newsletter, annual reports, brochures, company profile, backgrounders, internal and external house journal etc.

Acting as an interactive and updated online information source by

posting various hospital related information on several platforms like website, social media, blogs etc.

Keeping **employees aware and well-informed** about the important policies and decisions of hospital management and administration by designing, preparing, and disseminating different types of information through various means and tools.

Public Relations Manager is entrusted with the key role of finding out and resolving all patients' problems being faced during their stay in the hospital

Planning various health fairs and health education public forums for **dissemination of information about health matters and issues** which are extremely important for the masses to be aware of.

Performing **professional and public communications needs** assessment audit

Successful handling of Crisis situations through an **effective Crisis Communications Plan**.

Systematic and effective Public Relations are increasingly becoming one of the most important department of a hospital. One of the major reason behind it is increasing competition within the health care market since patients needs and expectations is increasing and there are various outlets for them to get information about the quality of services of a hospital and make an informed decision (Tengilimglu, 2001).

### Review of Literature

A number of studies have been done in the direction of emphasizing the importance of Public Relations function in a hospital and how they act as a source of two-way communication between the hospital and its patients and thus a strong driving factor behind the patient's choice of a hospital.

An important study in the direction of Public Relations and their role in hospitals is the one done by Anand & Chakravarty (1981). The authors point out towards a major fact concerning the role of hospital staff members in the direction of managing communication and image building of the hospital by describing that all employees of a hospital should some way or the other play the role of Public Relations Manager in terms of relationship building and acting as credible means of disseminating health related information about the hospi-

tal.

Mitchell(2004) points out that in order to ensure that the Public Relations Department play an indispensable role in strengthening the image and reputation of a hospital, it becomes very essential to appoint the right person as the Public Relations Practitioner of a hospital and he or she has to be a very trained professional.

According to Thomas R.K.(2006), Public Relations is the only bridge of communication between the hospital and its public. His paper highlights the change in the role of Public Relations in a hospital along with the progression in time. The paper describes that earlier media was the only source of external communication in a hospital, specially communication through print media which acted as the strongest medium of choice for communication in the 1960's in health care sector in comparison to all other media. But as the hospitals started ranking the role of patients in the hospital selection decision and as the competition for patients was becoming fierce day by day, in the mid 1970's, hospitals started realizing the significance of the function of Public Relations as a major communication tool and a major part of all the promotional efforts of a hospital.

Tengilimoglu, D; Yesiltas M. & Kisa A.(2007) have pointed out in their research paper that whatever may be the factors behind the patient's choice of hospitals, Public Relations Activity of a hospital is also an important factor behind their selection.

Kirdar (2007) discusses about the relation between Public Relations and Corporate Image of an organization. Public Relations Manager takes care of preparing various publications like brochures, annual report, newsletters and press releases of the hospital as Public Relations Activity, taking care of all types of media coverage, organizing various Public Relations Campaigns on relevant public health issues related with public interest and imparting training on public health, as some of the major Public Relations Activity which highly influence the perception of the patients towards a hospital.

Kunders,G.D(2007) points out that a major responsibility of the Public Relations Department is interpreting, advising, marketing, communicating, planning and publishing communication materials as well as establishing channels of communications between the hospital's management teams and its public.

Nikki(2009) states that Public Relations play a very important role in a hospital by establishing strong channels of communication between the hospital management and its internal and external publics, thus creating a sound network of both internal and external communication.

Martini (2010) describes that Corporate Communication has become an indispensable part of the successful functioning of any hospital which wants to create a strong brand image of itself in the highly competitive health care service market.

Gladeyam R.A .(2010) made a study in his research paper focusing on how a strong Public Relations Activity of a hospital can act as a strong Promotion Tool and how the functions of Public Relations and Marketing are interrelated.

Amiresmaili,M; Rostami,S. & Isfahami,P (2012) described the various parameters to analyze the role and level of Public Relations in a hospital and under it establishing communications and transferring messages constitute the main part of Public Relations activities.

Topan (2012) discusses that relationship building through Public Relations and Marketing Strategies have become immensely important in a hospital as they are the only means of patient communication through which they make the patients aware of the services they provide for them.

Gecikli,F (2014) discusses some of the key duties and responsibilities of a Public Relations Manager who is responsible for preparing posters, brochures and various other types of publications for disseminating information and thus communicating and enlightening the patients about the services of a hospital serving as strong channels of Patient Satisfaction.

According to Management Study Guide, communication is an essential ingredient of efficient public relations as it has always been a key department responsible for creating two-way communication between the organization and its concerned publics. In case of hospitals, Public Relations activities are chiefly responsible for ensuring smooth flow of information between the hospital authorities and its management on the one side and the patients and their immediate family members or relatives on the other side.

### Research Objectives

*To make a detail study on how Public Relations act as one of the strongest means of Patient Communication, thus serving the purpose of being one of the major tools of Timely and Accurate Health Communication and ultimately leading to overall Patient Satisfaction.*

*To find out patients perception about the various dimensions of Service Quality of a hospital.*

*To find out whether patients considered dissemination of timely information to them through proper channels of communication employed by the Public Relations Managers as the most preferred element of Patient Satisfaction.*

### Research Methodology

#### Data Collection:

Taking into consideration the topic of the research work, an in- depth review of the existing studies was done in order to understand the researches done so far in the area of study. To further analyze how Public Relations act as a major tool of enhancing Patient Communication, a primary research was done. A questionnaire was developed based on earlier questionnaires developed by Dilaver Tengilimoglu, Mehmet Yesiltas & Adnan Kisa(2007), Kirdar Y.(2007) and some other authors whose researches were related to the topic. A survey of patients of different hospitals was done to gather primary data on the opinion of the patients about the role and functions of Public Relations Manager of a hospital.

The questionnaire was so prepared in order to find out patients opinion about the role of Public Relations as a major tool of Patient Communication. The questionnaire consisted of 6 items. Data so obtained were analyzed on excel on the basis of percentage method and presented below from Tables 1-6.

#### Sample Design:

Employing Survey Methodology, a sample of 50 patients was randomly selected from different leading hospitals of Jaipur for the study.

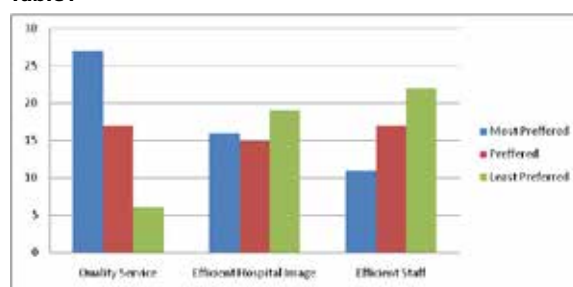
### Results & Findings:

*As per the aims and objectives of the study an analysis of the 7 items of the questionnaire are given below to find out patients opinion about the role of Public Relations in a hospital as a major tool of Patient Communication*

*Various factors behind the Patient's Preference for a hospital*

*Response to the question, "Rank your preference for hospital on the basis of the following options. (Rank your preference from 1-3. Rank 1 for most preferred)".*

**Table1**



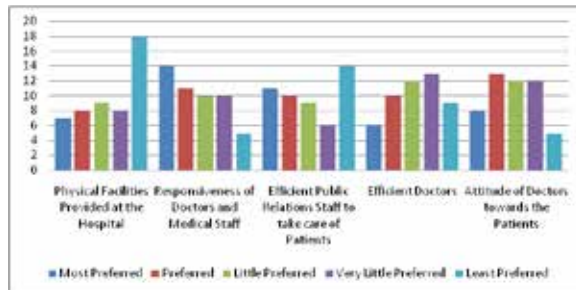
Out of the total respondents, highest number of the respondents ranked

**Quality of Service** of the hospital as the most preferred factor behind their selection of a hospital followed by **Good Hospital Image** as the second most preferred factor behind their selection and Efficient Staff secured the least number of most preferred ranking.

### Ranking of the various dimensions of Service Quality of a hospital

Response to the question, "What Ranking would you give to the following dimensions of Service Quality of a hospital. (Rank your preference from 1-5. Rank 1 for most preferred)"

**Table 2**



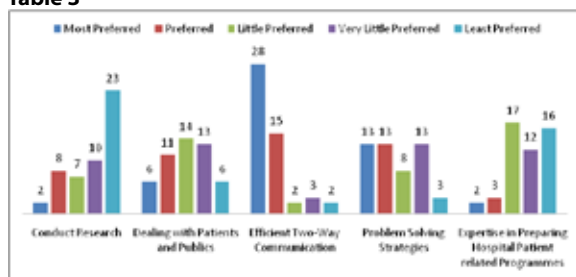
Out of total respondents who were asked to rank the various dimensions of Service Quality from 1-5, Responsiveness of Doctors and Medical Staff, and Efficient PR Staff to take care of patients and understand their needs were given the highest number of Most Preferred ranking by the respondents.

Responsiveness of Doctors and Medical Staff were given the highest Most Preferred ranking amongst the various dimensions of a hospital Service Quality, Efficient Public Relations Staff to take care of patients and their needs were given second highest number of most preferred ranking, Attitude of Doctors towards the patients third, Physical Facilities provided at the hospital were given fourth and Efficient Doctors fifth highest number of Most Preferred Ranking.

Ranking of the Role and Functions of hospital Public Relations Practitioner as per the degree of importance.

Response of the question, "What ranking would you give to the following role and functions of hospital Public Relations Practitioner as per their degree of importance given by you. (Rank your preference from 1-5. Rank 1 for most preferred)".

**Table 3**



Respondents were asked to rank five statements related to the role and functions of hospital Public Relations Practitioner as per their degree of importance.

Highest number of respondents ranked Efficient Two-Way Communication as the most preferred function of a Public Relations Practitioner in their ranking out of the other four statements. Problem Solving Strategies secured the second highest number of most preferred ranking, equally followed by Conducting Research and Expertise in preparing Hospital Patient related Programmes as the last number of highest preferred function of a hospital PR Manager.

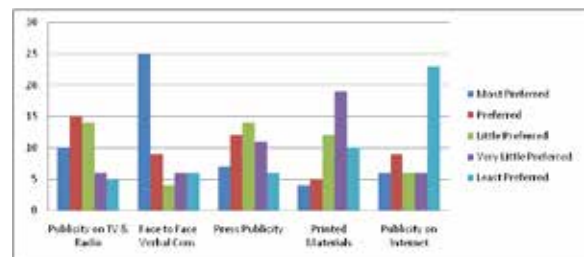
Ranking of the Public Relations Activities in the direction of promotion of hospitals and influencing patient's perception about hospital's

health services

Response to the question, "Rank the following Public Relation Activities in the direction of promotion of hospitals and influencing patient's perception about an hospital's health services.

(Rank your preference from 1-5. Rank 1 for most preferred)".

**Table 4**

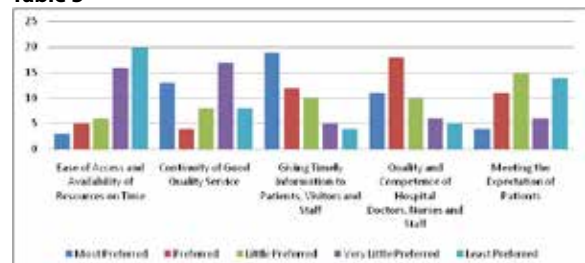


Out of the total respondents highest number of respondents ranked Face to Face Verbal Communication as the number one in terms of Public Relations Activities which influence patient's perception about an hospital's health services. Publicity on TV and Radio ranked as the second most preferred PR Activity. Press Publicity secured the third highest number followed by Publicity on Internet. Printed Material secured the least number of most preferred ranking among the various Public Relation Activities in the direction of promotion of hospitals and influencing patient's perception about hospital's health services.

Ranking of the elements of Patient Satisfaction as per the degree of importance

Response to the question, "Rank the following elements of Patient Satisfaction as per the degree of importance given by you. (Rank your preference from 1-5. Rank 1 for most preferred)".

**Table 5**

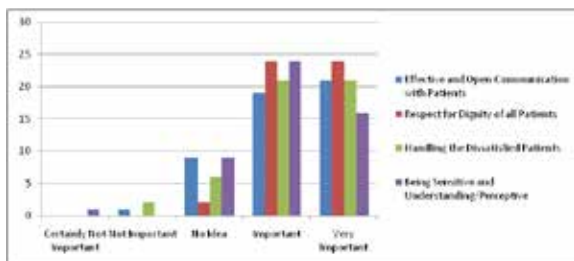


38% of the respondents ranked Giving Timely Information and Communication to patients, visitors, staff as the most preferred element among the various elements of Patient Satisfaction as per the degree of importance, 26% ranked Continuity of good Quality Service as the most preferred element of Patient Satisfaction, 22% ranked Quality and Competence of hospital doctors, nurses and staff as the most preferred element of Patient Satisfaction, 8% ranked Meeting the Expectation of Patients as the most preferred and 6% ranked Ease of Access and Availability of Resources on Time as the most preferred element of Patient Satisfaction among the other elements.

Ranking of the Customer Relations Principles in the direction of creating a positive Patient Relation

Response to the question, "What rate would you give to the following Customer Relations Principles in the direction of creating a positive Patient Relation".

**Table 6**



Out of total respondents, highest number of patients considered Respect for Dignity of all Patients as the “Very Important” Customer Relations Principle in the direction of creating positive Patient Relation.

Effective and Open Communication through Public Relations Manager and Handling the Dissatisfied Patients secured an almost equal number of “Very Important” ranking in terms of acting as Customer Relations Principle. Being Sensitive and Understanding and Perceptive towards the patients secured the least number of “Very Important” ranking by the patients as a Customer Relations Principle in the direction of creating a strong relation with patients.

### Conclusion

The Research Paper makes an in-depth study of the functions of the Public Relations Department of a hospital in the direction of Patient Communication. The paper tries to find out the opinion of various other thinkers who have also done research work in the same area and their vital conclusions on how Public Relations Manager plays an indispensable role in a hospital.

The findings of the study established a fact that patients ranked establishing efficient two-way communication as the most preferred function of hospital Public Relations Practitioner. The study also disclosed that patients ranked giving timely information to them and visitors of the hospital as the most preferred element of patient satisfaction. Thus the results clearly demonstrate few facts. Firstly, that patients considered Public Relations as a very important department in a hospital. Secondly they considered their role as expert communicators and disseminators of timely information as the most significant function. Finally the results of the research can be concluded by the fact that the patients being an important section of a hospital's public considered Public Relations as a major tool of Patient Communication resulting in Patient Satisfaction.

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