



Health Services and Public Relations in India: An Overview

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ABSTRACT

Indian Health Services has developed a lot in the past few years, either in terms of number of hospitals, the facilities and services being offered, the technology being used or the human resource capacity of the hospital. But we find a marked difference between the private and public sector hospitals in terms of facilities available as well as quality of services delivered.

The paper is an effort to study the Health Services of India, the problems it is undergoing and what has been the contribution of an effective PR Practice behind the successful functioning of the hospitals. The paper tries to make a deep study on the need for PR in hospitals and suggests certain model and instrument to be used extensively by the Indian Hospitals in its effort to provide qualitative health care services to the concerned public.

KEYWORDS : health care, services, development, shortcomings, PR practice, satisfaction, successful, model, instrument, yardstick

Introduction

Mckee and Healy describe hospital environment as an environment that is technically complex, surrounded by much uncertainty and contains information asymmetry. This asymmetry only enhances the mystique of the medical professional and often leaves the outsider confused and perplexed. Scott defined hospitals as complex organizations, with goals, tasks, control systems, and relationships of authority that are articulated in both formal and informal ways. (Gaurav, Ajay & Shahsi (2014).

Indian Health Services has developed a lot in comparison to the yesteryears but we still find it to be suffering from many shortcomings and deficiencies. The cost of health services is increasing at a skyrocketed rate, making it almost impossible for the common man to afford it, specially in terms of private hospitals. Commenting on the state of the Indian Health Care Sector, Aman Gupta, Principal Advisory of Indian Health Progress (IHP) remarked that Indian population is increasing day by day and as a result there is a tremendous pressure on the health care sector and its infrastructure to provide good services to the people. He discusses some of the key areas of the health care sector which needs to be developed.

- India faces the twin epidemic of continuing/emerging infectious diseases as well as chronic degenerative diseases.
- The former is related to poor implementation of the public health programs, and the latter to demographic transition with increase in life expectancy.
- Economic deprivation in a large segment of population results in poor access to health care.
- Poor educational status leads to non-utilization of scanty health services and increase in avoidable risk factors.
- India faces high burden of disease because of lack of environmental sanitation and safe drinking water, under-nutrition, poor living conditions, and limited access to preventive and curative health services.
- Lack of education, gender inequality and explosive growth of population contribute to increasing burden of disease.
- Expenditure on health by the Government continues to be low.
- States under financial constraints cut expenditure on health.
- Growth in national income by itself is not enough.

The three biggest challenges India faces in the Health Care Sector are the paucity of hospital beds for people, lack of skilled human resources and the rise in both infectious and non communicable disease. (Prathap Reddy, Chairman, Apollo Group of Hospitals). Kalidindi, S.R. (2012) suggested that, "The hospitals need to plan their infrastructure

and operational procedures centered on patient safety and comfort and this needs to be tightly regulated. More emphasis should be given on data collection and proper monitoring and audit of care and outcomes as part of quality assurance programme. They should put in place a comprehensive set of policies and procedures for safe delivery of various aspects of health service."

Analysis of Indian Private and Public Hospital

When we talk of the Health Care Sector, it comprises of both private and public hospitals. The Indian scenario is such that public hospitals are generally suffering from the problem of poor infrastructural framework, lack of facilities, poor quality of services, unavailability of experienced and skilled doctors at the time of need, lack of modern equipments, extremely poor or average physical and environmental conditions and above all indifferent attitude of hospital staff members. Such dilapidated and poor state of affairs of public hospitals has contributed to a great extent in generating patient dissatisfaction and the shifting of the loyalties of the patients from public to private hospitals.

Private hospitals on the other hand provide advanced facilities, technologies and improved services, thus providing more choices of treatment to the patients. But however the objective of making profit and securing a good position in the competition amongst the health care service providers, creates a tremendous challenge for the private hospitals to survive and at the same time provide good quality of services to the customers primarily patients, finally leading to their satisfaction.

Vani (2014) made a comparative analysis of private and public sector hospitals and emphasized that private hospitals are leading the Health Care Service Market because of many factors like better quality services and facilities and good reputation and image. The study therefore stressed on the need for an exclusive department called PR Department which would chiefly function in the area of patient care and satisfaction which would finally result in positive image building of the hospital.

Raman & Bjorkman (1996) remarked that, "At independence the private sector in India had only 8% of health care facilities (world bank, 2004), but recent estimates indicate that 93% of all hospitals, 64% of beds, 85% of doctors, 80% of outpatients and 57% of inpatients are in the private sector (World Bank 2001)". Taking into consideration the growing popularity of private hospitals and many deficiencies in the functioning of public hospitals, Raman & Bjorkman have suggested Private/Public Partnership (PPP) so that both the two types of hospi-

tals can help each other by the sharing of their resources, technology and skilled manpower ultimately leading to the advancement and development of the quality of health services in India.

Arya S.B. (2012) made a comparative analysis of public and private health services in Mumbai region. The study comments that although National Health Policy was enacted by the parliament of India in 1983 and updated in 2002, but the reality still remains that there is an absence of a fixed policy framework. So public hospitals have to bear the consequences as they are already understaffed and poorly financed.

Vani(2014) while studying about the formal features of corporate hospitals, pointed out that, " At the time of independence the private health care sector accounted for only 5 to 10 per cent of total patient care. However in 2004, the share of private sector in total hospitalized treatment was estimated at 58.3 per cent in rural areas and 61.8 per cent in urban areas. In the case of non hospitalized treatment, government sources account for only 22 per cent in rural areas and 19 per cent in urban areas (Planning Commission, 2008: 68–69) Data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) III also confirms that the private medical sector remains the primary source of health care for the majority of households in urban (70 per cent) as well as rural areas (63 per cent). Private doctors or clinics are the main source of care in India, catering to 46 per cent of the urban and 36 per cent of the rural households (Rao P.H, 2010:1).

Role of PR in Hospital

In the present times hospitals have become super specialized and technologically more advanced, offering more choices of treatment to the patients. Successful hospital management is concerned with the proper staffing, coordination, systematic planning, evaluating and delivery of qualitative health services to the patients in a cost-effective manner.

PR is an indispensable part of every organization in today's times, being the sole face of the organization, representing its image in front of its target public. Improved public relations activities are steadily becoming one of the most important activities hospitals can engage. This increased emphasis is fueled by increased competition within the health care market where consumers are becoming more selective and using health-related information to make informed choices (Tengilimoglu, 2001). Today there are more and more private hospitals entering into the health care service market.

The PR departments are expected to deal with the management of both internal and external communication. Role of PR within an organization has become that of a spokesperson, advisor, counselor as well as analyst to the management. They are responsible for receiving both employee and consumer feedback and make management aware of it and at the same time make the public aware of the policies and programmes of the organization. This is similar to the Two-way symmetric PR Model (by Grunig and Hunt 1984) which includes equality of communication using extensive dialogue and exchanges of views equally from the side of both sender and receiver to change attitudes in order to satisfy the need of the other. (*nikkyltai.blogspot.com*)

Objectives of the Study

The study is aimed to make a deeper insight into the Health Care Scenario in India and the numerous problems being faced by the sector. The study is an overview in the form of literature analysis of how can PR contribute significantly in satisfying and fulfilling the needs and desires of the people. The study tries to make an analysis of few established PR Models and Instrument of determining Service Quality dimensions and suggests its employment in the Indian Health Care Sector for a much better delivery of its services.

Research Methodology

The study is explanatory in nature and employs secondary research work. It makes a deep study of the state of Indian Health Services and the role of PR in it in the direction of acting as skilled communication professionals entrusted with the task of building mutually cordial relations with all stakeholders of the health services, specially hospital organization. The research is an overview of the existing literature on health services and PR. The study is also exploratory as it

explores the relevance and usefulness of certain established models and instruments in the Indian health care scenario as this is the need of the hour and few hospitals give the required significance to the model when it comes to their implementation in regard to the role and functions of PR Department.

Theoretical Framework

No doubt the Health Services of India has developed a lot, specially the private sector hospitals. Various studies have pointed out that private hospitals have witnessed a tremendous development in the past few years in terms of their number, employment of advanced technology, quality of services and facilities delivered as well as number of admissions.

Parsuraman, Berry & Ziethaml has discussed the SERVQUAL Instrument as a very important yardstick in 1985 to evaluate the service quality dimensions of organizations. The instrument is very useful in measuring customer's perception about the service quality dimensions of an organization on the basis of five determinants namely, Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance and Empathy. The instrument tries to measure the gap between customer's expectations from an organization and their opinion about the actual services delivered. SERVQUAL Instrument can be very useful in case of hospital organization, as hospitals are a very important service sector organization. So it becomes important to adopt certain determinants for evaluating the quality of health services and SERVQUAL Instrument can play a very important role in this direction.

Besides SERVQUAL Instrument, four US PR Models was given by James Grunig & Todd Hunt in their book "Managing Public Relations". These four models of PR Practice in USA described about the process of evolution of PR Practice. These were:

- Press Agency/Publicity Model
- Public Information Model
- Two-Way Asymmetrical Model
- Two-Way Symmetrical PR Model

The Two-Way Symmetric US PR Model is a platform for both the two parties in communication process to persuade each other equally with an open mind and as a result both the two parties are equally open to accept others view point and are ready to modify their attitudes and behaviors according to the needs as a result of PR Programme. The model emphasizes on the element of dialogue as well as formative research which says that an organization should research on how the public perceive the organization and what would be the results of the policies/actions of an organization on the public.

There is a need to employ Two-Way Symmetric US PR Model and the SERVQUAL Instrument more widely and more effectively in the Indian Health Care Sector in order to implement the principle of two-way communication and mutual understanding between the organization and its public. It is necessary that a health related Inclusive Education System should be developed where PR professionals should be made aware and educated about the model and the instrument and their utility in the smooth running of a hospital.

The structure of Private Health Care Sector in India:

Vani (2014) described that, " One could characterize the structure of the private sector as pyramidal, with the base consisting of the large number of individual practitioners who may be trained or untrained. The middle level is occupied by single entrepreneur, mostly doctors. The apex of the pyramid is occupied by large hospitals that are promoted as trust, private limited or corporate enterprises. These hospitals offer super-specialty services and are located largely in the metropolises. (Srinivasan A V, 2000:58). The emergence of corporate hospitals in Indian health care revolutionized the entire health care scenario of the country. Most of these hospitals are professionally managed with the objectives of providing prompt, adequate, continuous and satisfactory services to the patients".

Muraleedharan V.R. (1999) has discussed about the characteristics and structure of private hospital sector in urban India in the context of Madras city. The study dealt in detail with policies, infrastructure, skilled professionals, resources available and pricing structure of private hospitals from the perspective of Madras city. The author

emphasized on a very important fact that since the mid 1990's the government of India have been trying to persuade the various state governments to introduce appropriate regulatory mechanisms for the private sector which would include designing physical standards for various categories of hospitals and evolving an appropriate accreditation system besides establishing redress system for patients."

Role of PR in the Image Building of Health Services

Significant studies have been conducted in the area of role and functions of PR in hospitals highlighting the different aspects and dimensions of the functions of PR Managers in a hospital and why and how they can be a strong force behind creating a very strong positive image and reputation amongst the concerned target public.

A major study highlighting the role of PR in hospitals was done by Chandra & Kelly Kathleen S. (1999). The study pointed out towards the growth of PR function in hospital and the reasons behind its growth as well as the role of PR in the successful functioning of hospitals in the context of US hospitals. The authors have emphasized on the role theory of Public Relations in hospital by describing that PR Practitioners perform two major roles in a hospital and they are the role of technician and a manager. Practitioners enacting the managers role use formative and evaluative research in their work (Broom & Dozier, 1986). They have further added that PR Practitioners basically employ environmental scanning and fact finding methods to monitor their organization's internal and external environment.

T.T Mitchell (2004) pointed out that it becomes very essential for a hospital organization to appoint the right person as the PR Manager. The author discussed about ten specific points to be followed by any hospital organization as a kind of rule set to be successful in the health care sector.

1. **Communicate effectively.**
2. **Professionalism**
3. **Acting like a professional**
4. **Be aware of nonverbal communication.**
5. **Being perceptive**
6. **Handling dissatisfied or complaining patients calmly and reasonably.**
7. **Respecting the dignity of all patients.**
8. **Being tolerant**
9. **Smile**
10. **Avoid using terms of endearment when addressing a patient.**

Kirdar (2007) pointed out towards the various Tools a PR Personnel uses in the direction of creating strong and successful Corporate Communication Channels of a hospital. He explained that hospitals are considered different from other organizations in public relations activities from the point of view of their operations and the public segments they serve. He discussed on certain major features or functions of a hospital from a Public Relations point of view.

Osborn.M.(2009), discussed about the PR profession and its changing dimensions , specially in terms of health care services. The author discussed the point of view of different thinkers in this direction in his literature review. Although the primary focus of hospital PR managers over the years traditionally has been communication functions including media relations, community relations, publications and marketing communications, Lewton says the manager's role gradually has evolved to include responsibility for the entire marketing program. Rather than presenting PR strategies and tactics as ends in themselves, successful PR professionals should "develop and present their work in terms of its ability to help achieve corporate objectives".

According to one of the Internet source, www.scribd.com/doc/44647234/Public-Relation-Needs-Importance, Cached Public relations play a major role in projecting a good image of the hospital in the eyes of the public, specially in front of patients and it has been highly instrumental in understanding their needs and problems.

Another important study which focuses on the role of Public Relations, specially a sound Corporate Communication Practice behind the smooth functioning of a hospital is the one done by Marina (2010). The study dealt with the immensely increasing significance of Corporate Communication in today's highly competitive health care services market and also to build up a healthy hospital environment.

Conclusion & Future Directions

The paper by making a study of the Indian Health Services, draws attention towards certain facts related to the functioning of the sector and at the same discusses the indispensable role and functions of a PR Manager in a hospital. The paper suggests certain model and yardsticks which if followed by the PR Practitioners in their delivery of services in Indian Hospitals, specially private hospitals, can pave the way for the better functioning of such hospitals, thus coming at par with the needs and expectations of all the concerned stakeholders of the hospital, finally leading to their satisfaction. In future the results of the employment of such models and instrument on the quality of functions of PR professionals can be further more scientifically tested by conducting more researches in public as well as private hospitals in order to understand their significance in Indian Health Services.

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