

Prioritizing patients

TRANSFORMING HEALTH CARE THROUGH A PATIENT-FOCUSED APPROACH

by Nora Soersdahl

James Cullen is the former CEO of Gaylord Specialty Healthcare, in Wallingford, Conn.; St. Joseph Medical Center, in Towson, Md.; and Hospital of Saint Raphael, in New Haven, Conn.

Do you find it frustrating that even when you have scheduled an appointment with your health care provider, you end up having to wait for an hour or maybe even more before you are seen? Or, when you see a doctor for treatment, you have no idea what the treatment will cost, and even when you ask for cost information, it's not provided to you? We have all been there, and we all know how frustrating and time consuming it can be. But it doesn't have to be this way.

In the midst of rising health care costs and intense public scrutiny of the American health care system, there is a growing buzz surrounding the value of adopting a more consumer-focused approach to health care. James Cullen, CEO of Conach Consulting, and adjunct faculty member at Simmons College School of Management, has extensive experience with the American health care system. According to Cullen, the system is suffering because it is neglecting the primary user—patients. However, he believes that this can be resolved if health care becomes more consumer oriented. “My definition of an ideal health care system is one that delivers the highest quality care in the most appropriate setting at the most economically reasonable cost, and where patients are treated with the same ‘respect’ as consumers in traditional retail or service markets,” says Cullen.

This concept of respect for health care consumers, Cullen argues, translates to meeting three primary consumer demands: service affordability, on-demand access to care, and a more tailored service approach.

While the rising cost of health care continues to be a concern for employers and insurance companies alike, it is, perhaps even more so, a concern for today's patients who are being asked to pay an increasingly higher portion of the cost of their care out of their own pockets. Budget-minded consumers are used to comparison shopping and looking for the supplier or service with the best price for the product they need. But this type of information is rarely available to the health care consumer. In an effort to try to fill this gap, new businesses are opening up that compile cost information from various providers and share it with consumers, helping them make informed choices about where to receive their care. Cullen believes, though, that it is important that the cost and service information come directly from the health care provider, and not third party apps and websites. This is because information that does not come directly from the provider has a higher risk of being inaccurate, potentially creating mistrust with the consumer.

Also, in today's on-demand economy, health care consumers expect quick, quality access to their providers. When appointments need to be scheduled months in advance, when wait times in the office are an hour or more, and when the consultation is rushed, the consumer feels neglected. All these elements create barriers to effective physician-patient communication and may cause the consumer to look elsewhere for his or her care. While changing doctors is a tiring process that most would like to avoid, frustrated consumers are beginning to shop around for practices that can



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meet their access and service demands. And putting an emphasis on service is a growing trend.

Today, when deciding which restaurant to go to or which movie to see, consumers often turn to online rating and review sites, such as Yelp or Consumer Reports, to help them make their decisions. Additionally, many online stores, such as Amazon and Asos, also offer customers the chance to write a review about the product they have purchased. Cullen believes that this is a trend that will soon catch on in the health care industry because it is a feature more and more patients are requesting, especially the younger generation.

Some question if health care becomes more consumer oriented does that also mean health care will become more elitist? In a capitalistic economy service comes with a price tag. In other words, better service equals higher price. According to Cullen, quality of care does not have to be linked to a higher price. "Compare the health care industry to the auto industry. When you walk into a car dealership that sells Hondas you will most likely not receive the same level of service as when you walk into a dealership that sells Maseratis. However, this does not mean that a Honda is a bad car." Cullen believes that "A consumer-ori-

ented health care system will not give patients better treatment with a bigger price tag, instead it will give excellent treatment across the board as well as an option for the consumer to pay for personalized service."

Many people within the health care field believe that the health care industry is not able to meet these needs of accessibility, cost transparency, and a more personalized approach to service. Cullen, on the other hand, disagrees. He believes that these demands are not unrealistic and that adopting a more transparent approach to service will be a big step forward to meeting consumers' demands. States, including Massachusetts, have transparency laws, requiring providers to make costs available to patients, but implementation and access have been inconsistent. Many providers argue it is too difficult. Cullen says, "Transparency is key because the consumer should be as well informed as possible, and should have the chance to access all the information he or she needs or wants that is relevant to his or her care—whether that is information about treatment options, service expectations, or costs. Having a set of openly communicated, realistic expectations goes a long way towards creating satisfied consumers." ■