

Patient Satisfaction with Outpatient Medical Care in the United States

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ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND: Patients are taking a greater role in decisions about their care and treatment. Patient satisfaction is one important indicator of health outcomes and plays a key role in improving health service quality. While there is extensive public discussion of patients' satisfaction with physicians, patient satisfaction with outpatient care has not been well characterized.

OBJECTIVE: To characterize patients' satisfaction with outpatient medical care in the US.

METHODS: Data on 14,984 patients' visits were obtained from a validated online patient satisfaction survey. Data from the National Ambulatory Medical Care Survey were used to assess how the demographics of the sample population compared with the demographics of patients seeing US physicians, and the analysis was limited to data on doctors with 10 or more ratings within 2004-2010 to help ensure representative scoring. Patients' overall satisfaction with their physicians was scored on a 0-10 scale (where 10 is best and 0 is worst). Patients also reported their waiting times, how much time the doctor spent with them, and their satisfaction with several dimensions of the medical visit experience.

RESULTS: The average overall patient satisfaction rating was 9.28. Of the 14,984 ratings, 10,510 (70.1%) were 10s and another 2291 (15.3%) were 9s. Less than 2% of the ratings were 0s or 1s (276 of the 14,984). Multivariate analysis revealed that waiting time, spending time with patient, and age category all were statistically significantly associated with patient satisfaction scores (all $P < .05$).

CONCLUSION: The great majority of patients reporting their satisfaction online are highly satisfied with their outpatient medical care.

KEYWORDS: Outpatient physician care; Patient satisfaction; Quality of care

Patient satisfaction is the degree to which the individual regards a health care service as useful, effective, or beneficial.¹ Satisfaction is a complex, multidimensional concept, and uses of exclusively quantitative methods for its measure do not fully encompass patients' perspectives.²⁻⁴ Nevertheless, patient satisfaction ratings are a key indicator of quality of care.⁵ Patient satisfaction is clearly not the only important dimension of quality of care—accuracy of diagnoses, effectiveness of treatments, and cost are other important dimensions—but patient satisfaction is an important and desired health care quality outcome measure.⁶ Measuring patient satisfaction is essential to making services attractive to patients and to improving service delivery. While patient satisfaction measures have long been incorporated into reports of hospital and health plan quality, outpatient-based clinics are increasingly assessing service quality using patient-based outcome measures.^{7,9}

The public's general impression of outpatient medical quality may be driven in part by personal experience and in part by reports in newspapers and other media that often are not complimentary.¹⁰ Based on theoretical assertions, some writers have suggested that images of health service workers on television and other media outlets even influence whether a person decides to seek medical services.¹¹ Although public impressions are not entirely favorable, patient satisfaction with outpatient medical care is not well characterized. The purpose of this study was to determine a more representative picture of how satisfied patients are with their outpatient medical care.

METHODS

We used data from a convenience sample of all responders to a validated online physician rating/patient satisfaction survey (www.DrScore.com, Medical Quality Enhancement Corp., Winston-Salem, NC) to determine patient satisfaction with US physicians.^{12,13} To help ensure sampling of physicians with representative scores, the analysis was limited to physicians with 10 or more ratings; patients were permitted to rate a particular doctor only once every 3 months to prevent skewing of the scores. To assess how well this population represented the population of US outpatients, we compared the demographics of the study population to the demographics of patients seeking outpatient care in the US using data from the National Ambulatory Medical Care Survey (NAMCS), a representative survey of US outpatient practice performed by the National Center for Health Statistics.¹⁴ Online survey data from 2005-2010 were included in the analysis and were compared with 2009 NAMCS data, because most of the responses to the online survey (87%) were in the most recent years of the survey (2009 and 2010), and the 2009 NAMCS data were the most recent available for comparison.

The online patient satisfaction survey assessed patients' perception of overall satisfaction, coordination of care, access to services and appointments, the quality of the medical care, and the efficiency of the practice. Data on overall satisfaction with care, personal information, health care information, clinic rating, and areas of improvement were queried. Responders reported quantitative responses on a 0-10 (0 is the worst, 10 the best) scale on various dimensions of outpatient care.

The analysis focused on 3 main variables: overall satisfaction with care, waiting times, and how much time the doctor spent with the patient. The percentages of missing data in all sections were between 5% and 6%. All analyses were performed using SAS software (Version 9.2.; SAS Institute, Cary, NC); a significance level of .05 was used for all analyses, and all missing values were deleted from consideration. We performed multivariate linear regression with ordinary least squares analyses, taking satisfaction as a dependent variable.

RESULTS

There were 14,984 responses that met inclusion criteria, of which 65% were women and 35% men, and the percentage of missing data was 3.2% (Table 1). A broad age range of patients was sampled, most

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