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Management of Public Relations in Hospitals

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Abstract

Quantitative measurement of good public relations of a hospital is not possible. It can be analysed on the basis of general impressions of that hospital. In present scenario health care market is competitive and consumers have innumerable options to choose from various health care establishments. The image of a hospital on the public may be positive or negative and is dependent on several factors such as quality of services, cost of care, cleanliness, attitude of hospital staff, presence of better technology, presence of specialist physicians, prior pleasant experience with the hospital personnel, etc. The creation of good impression is a consequence of a systematic, deliberately planned and conscious effort of the brand builders. It is not a result of chance alone. The cumulative efforts of the public relations department and the staff of the hospital promote acceptance, understanding and appreciation of the hospital by the community at large. Hospital policies and personnel activities must dovetail to patient satisfaction. This is the only way to ensure retention of patient's patronage.

Keywords: Public Relations Officer, health facilities, communication, Public Relationship Channels

Introduction

'Health is Wealth' as the saying goes on; Health Facilities are indicator of the development stage of a country. According to the constitution of India "Health", is a state subject and provision of health services to public is the foremost duty of the State Health Department. To accomplish this it works with the support of local health organizations anywhere these exist, e.g. Municipalities, Panchayati Raj and Corporations.

The definition of hospital by WHO Expert Committee¹ is that "Hospital is an essential part of a Social and Medical organization and comprises of function of which is to provide for the population complete health care, both curative and preventive, and whose outpatient services reach out to the family and its home environment; the hospital is also a centre for the training of health workers and bio-social research".

Quality of health care and public relations of service providers are imperative for patient's compliance. Mosadeghrad A.M.² defined quality healthcare as "consistently delighting the patient by providing efficacious, effective and efficient healthcare services according to the latest clinical guidelines and standards, which meet the patients' needs and satisfies providers". Public relations as defined by Grunig and Hunt³ are "management of communication between an organization and its publics". It is imperative to examine the role of public relations as a tool for attaining effective healthcare management. Positive relationship between good public relations and patients' supports in retaining the patients. The charm of media relations strategies amongst medical practitioners has remained consistent and prominent in the past as well¹⁵. Healthcare organization must pay consistent and thoughtful devotion to the quality of healthcare services. Patient should never be taken for granted. Polite and sympathetic attitude of service providers such as doctors, nurses, lab technician, etc. attracts the patients to a considerable extent. Congenial hospital environment complements the services provided. Patients who are treated with care and respect feel more satisfied and usually return to the same health provider for their treatment. They feel more secure when they receive continuing care from the same healthcare provider.

Healthcare public relations is novel and rapidly growing area where public relations consultants would benefit immensely by widening their experience through making foray into this zone. The general level of quality health service delivery will also intensify as

competition deepens and patients get better healthcare service, which aids the society⁴.

The Changing Role of Hospitals

The history of hospitals dates back to distant past with hospitals in Greece, the Roman Empire and in the Indian subcontinent⁵. There has been a slow and steady evolution through the years during the 18th and 19th centuries, a gradual transformation, during which the role of hospital has shifted from:

- Individual orientation towards community orientation
- Curative medicine to preventive (defensive)
- Tertiary and secondary to primary health care

The significant factors responsible for transformation in functions of the hospital are as follows^{6,7}:

- Change in health care demands and emergence in new technology.
- Growth of the consumers from the dying, needy and poor to all classes of people.
- Improvement in socio-economic status of the public.
- Increase in standard of living which has led to higher expectation of people for better services in health care establishments.
- Better control of contagious or communicable infections.
- Increase in chronic degenerative illnesses.
- Better means of and transport and communications
- Provision of complete health care has become part and parcel of responsibility of the government.
- Higher level of health awareness in the people.
- Role of constitutional and professional organizations in promotion and control of quality of health care.
- More specialized medical branches.
- Rapid advancement in medical science.
- Growth in technology of health care.
- Improvement in both diagnostic and therapeutic tools.
- Greater stress on primary health care delivery.
- Greater awareness of the public.
- Cost and quality apprehensions.
- Changing social and disease-type.
- Allocation of extra resources dedicated to healthcare.
- Emphasis on professionalism.

Public Relations

Amongst numerous definitions Public Relations Society of America (PRSA)⁸ selected the following for Public Relations, "Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics." Public relations effect the image of a hospital by the users. The image of a hospital may be positive or negative amongst the public depending on perception of users. PR professional in a hospital setting work with the organization and portrays the client's reputation, image and accomplishments in a positive light.

The Image of a hospital is an amalgamation of the following stakeholders:

- Perception of hospital by the public.
- Presence of High-quality nursing and physician staff employed by the hospital and their conduct.
- Policies and manner of the hospital management.

The basic requirements of all the above-mentioned stakeholders differ. Outlook of patients is to get efficient, effective and satisfactory healthcare services. Hospital Staff desires job satisfaction as well as appreciation and recognition by their peers and public. Hospital management has a wider perspective and wants both competence and satisfaction of staff and well-being of patients who are utilizing the facilities of the hospital.

In the present scenario in healthcare services management of public relations in hospitals is very important owing to changing role of hospitals and if the public relations are not managed by the management, then the hospital may not be able to remain operational.

Management of Public Relations in Hospitals

Major stakeholders in a hospital are:

1. Patients
2. The Government
3. The Promoters
4. Staff (Doctors, Nurses, Para-Medical, Managerial etc.)

The present thinking on management of hospitals stresses the need for effective public relations coupled with the need for systematic marketing of the services, the hospital can offer to its various publics⁹. People's expectations from hospitals have increased significantly owing to improved socio-economic conditions. The role of hospital in a community cannot be considered alone. A hospital is a part of social system and has to deal with health care professionals, administrative and managerial personnel, patients, visiting relatives and the community at large. Cooperation between the different groups is integrated. Functioning of hospital is not limited to customer satisfaction only.

Public relations is a relatively new service in hospitals. The extent of good public relations programme is not limited to only inside of the hospital but also extends outside. Inside of the hospital is mainly concerned with maintenance of a dedicated staff who can deliver enthusiastic, whole-hearted and personal service to patients, and outside to interconnect the people's perception of the activities and policies of the hospital to the hospital's administration¹⁰.

The personnel for successful communication with the public, for both internal and external communications within health care institutions should be separate with well-defined roles. The Public Relation (PR) Officers must be calm and comfortable while speaking with the public and trained to handle any adverse situation. Creating Public Relationship is at the core of everything we do in our society. It is particularly significant in health care, where patients/clients can feel defenceless and frightened, and where the health care team who rely on good communication to assist them deliver safe as well as effective care.

Factors that promote a positive impression of a hospital are:

- Qualified and competent health care professionals.
- A mutual trust between its customers and the hospital.
- A good understanding and Goodwill amongst patients and the hospital staff.

Asking users of the hospital facilities regarding their general impression of a particular hospital can give an

insight as to the extent the hospital enjoys customer satisfaction. According to Skinner *et al*¹¹ public relations exhibit certain characteristics as shown in **Fig. 1**.

The impression which the community has about the hospital may be either pleasant, unpleasant or indifferent. Conception of a good image of a hospital has to be intentionally planned and is not a result of chance. Promotion and monitoring of public relations to endorse understanding and appreciation of the hospital by the community is an incessant process.

Factors which contribute to complaints and poor image of the hospital are substandard quality of services, indifferent care, poor information system, improper guidance, lags in

service, overcrowding, too much noise, long waiting periods, poor sanitation and discourteous behaviour of staff.

The image parameter of the hospital is affected by the staff interaction with others i.e.

- Press
- Patient
- Relatives and Visitors
- Community Leaders
- Community Organization

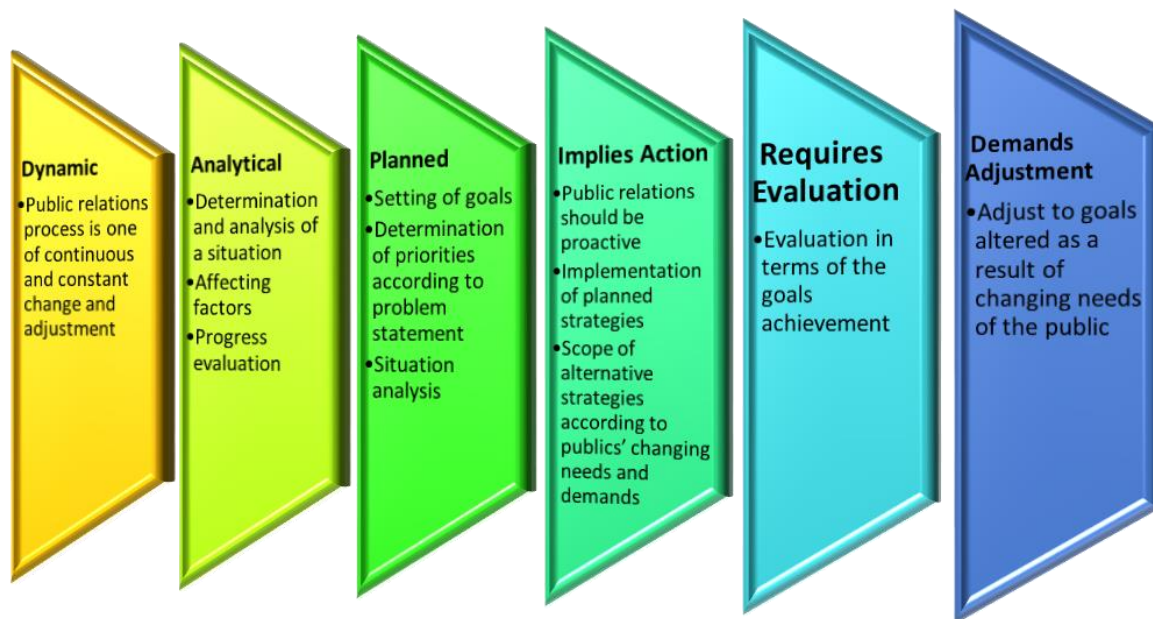


Fig. 1: Public relations exhibit the following characteristics.

Methods to Promote Public Relations

Good public relations can be promoted in a hospital by two methods which are the operative methods and the communicative methods.

Operative Methods

These methods basically include the workforce covering nearly every aspect of the hospitals operations, such as inquiry, telephone operators, admission section personnel, office clerks etc. There are people who come in direct contact with patients while some work behind the screen.

The *three main components* of a hospital's operation are:

1. Cheerful and polite conduct
2. Quick and competent treatment
3. Cleanliness, neat and tidy staff

Some of the significant characteristics are:

- Worthy good quality patient care is the *sine qua non* (indispensable and essential action) of good public relations. Poor professional care cannot get compensated by smiles and advertising.
- Satisfactory infrastructure and facilities that take into consideration the basic comforts of the patients and the attendants. Well lighted spacious waiting areas, clean toilets, hygienic drinking water and cafeteria in the OPD.
- Satisfied employees contribute a long way in success

of any organization. To increase efficacy good morale of workers plays a significant role. Interaction of workers amongst each other with high morale is more positive and this positivity influences relations with patients and the community. Frustrated and unsatisfied staff of a hospital such as doctors, paramedics and technicians will have a negative effect on the functioning of the hospital and may be a cause of disrepute. A welcome smile and courteous attitude of staff influences the public relations positively.

- The patients should not be harmed while incorporating technology in patient's diagnosis and treatment. Efforts should be made to minimize anxiety in patient's and attendants.
- Good administration leads to operating efficiency and effective coordination among all outpatient and inpatient clinical departments as well as other supportive services. The workers should be trained to understand the interplay between organizational structure, it's policies, procedures that must be followed, accountability to authority.
- Major confusions by patients initiate in the OPD. The waiting period of patients should be reduced to bare minimum.
- The procedure of admission of patients plays a great role and should be such that it does not decrease the patient load¹².

- The cleanliness of the hospital premises at all hours is of utmost importance. The behaviour of the hospital staff should be courteous with the visitors of the patient as their visit to a hospital inpatient is an emotional and sensitive issue. All the queries arising during the visiting hours should be dealt with care by the nursing or medical staff.

Communicative Methods

The application of communicative methods means all conceivable forms of communication to enable the hospital to disseminate its message to the public. The main principles of communicative approach include effective communication, well versed in language of communication, fluency and accuracy.

The *communicative approaches* can be used in the following ways:

- Appropriate information regarding the patient's diagnosis, treatment, health status and follow up should be available in discharge summary to patients and their relatives. A conversation with the attending physician at the time of discharge is very important.
- A consideration regarding visitors has to be kept in mind in such a way that it does not interfere with routine medical functions. High turnover of visitors to patients is a usual feature in Indian scenario.
- During the visiting hours the enquiries of the visitors can be discussed with doctor or nurse familiar with the patient's condition in the ward.
- Frequent rounds by hospital administrators will help in keeping up the level of alertness of staff. They should be kept as informal as possible.
- There should be a facility to attend to verbal complaints and do their rectification rather than insisting on written ones.
- Replies to questions must be prompt when replying to written communication.
- There must be arrangement of a suggestion box.
- Pictorial communication in the form of film shows, exhibitions, hospital brochure is beneficial.
- Members of organizations, general public or peoples' representatives and religious leaders can be given hospital tours so that they can see all features of the hospital's operation.
- To give suggestions to the hospital for rectification of shortcomings an Advisory Committee should be set up.
- Visual media such as talk shows on radio and television make a big impact.

Indicators for Measuring Public Relations

These help to recognise ways of refining medical care which results into satisfied and happier patients.

Means through which the *extent of successful public relations can be judged* are:

- General opinion poll can be conducted.
- Patient satisfaction surveys- This can be done by an outdoor survey agency or done as an in-house survey. A survey questionnaire with multiple choices related to the different services offered is provided to the patients.
- Number of complaints received for the services rendered by the establishment.

- Turnover of the medical and nursing staff.
- Consistency of the patients to get treated in the hospital.
- Aids/ contributions received by the hospital from patrons.
- Letters of recommendation to editors in local papers.
- Level of voluntary community support.
- Inpatients leaving against medical advice (LAMA)⁶
- Lesser the number of complaints received indicates better Public Relations of the hospital.
- Higher Foot fall is also indicative of satisfied patients.

Guidelines for dealing with difficult patients/customers

1. Make use of positive language.
2. Don't lose the focus of the conversation.
3. Persist to polite and professional attitude.
4. Adhere to policies.
5. Paraphrase.
6. Develop communications skills of the dealing staff.
7. Train the staff.
8. Keen observation of verbal and non-verbal messages and response accordingly.
9. Consult supervisor whenever deemed necessary.

Guidelines for attending Telephone call

1. Telephone call should be answered promptly preferably by the third ring.
2. Speak clearly and slowly in a pleasant tone.
3. Treat the caller with respect. The caller must be greeted in a welcoming manner and the staff must state both his/her name and the department/division. The caller will feel comfortable with this introduction and also understand whether he has dialled the correct number and be assisted promptly.
4. Be on a lookout of your language usage throughout.
5. The caller should be addressed by his/her name as far as possible.
6. Respond properly when busy with a call. Remain conversant and polite. Silence at your end will mislead the caller to your presence. It is polite to show that you are attending the call by saying for example, "Yes", "Of course", "I agree".
7. During your call all your attention must be on the telephone conversation. Don't get distracted by the people in the room. Focus on the caller and do not speak to others while attending the call. Never eat while attending a telephone call.
8. It is better not to keep callers on hold for more than a few seconds. Instead their number should be requested and offer should be made to have someone return their call.
9. Effective telephone skills are a good and an important influence to any organization
10. Direct the rude callers to your supervisor in a polite way both with kindness and understanding.

Dealing with an Argumentative and Verbally Abusive Customer

In case of Difficult Customer Situations, the PR personnel must:

1. Listen to the complainant calmly.
2. Speak softly.
3. Remain calm and composed.
4. Empathize with the patient.

5. Professional response.
6. Recognition of underlying factors.
7. Ask questions regarding problems.
8. Summarize the situation and give feedback.
9. Acquaint the customer with the consequences, calmly and factually.
10. In the situation when you have to say “No”, do it in a right way with no antagonism and you can still get a “thank you” for your service.

Role of Public Relationship Officer in Hospital

Public Relations is an innovative, creative and fast-paced branch. It may sometimes be stressful and involve long unscheduled working hours due to unforeseen circumstances but it is extremely rewarding in healthcare industry. Role of Public relations (PR) is about handling reputation of the institution. PR officers use all forms of communication pathways to build and uphold the reputation of their patients and their hospital. A career in PR includes attaining understanding and support for patients, good communication skills, research skills, broad perspective, effective time management and creative thinking. Good PR tactics will go a long way to build trust, influence opinion and behaviour of patients. Use of third party endorsements to make an impact on the diverse population and to create goodwill is very important. This helps in creating an understanding between the healthcare organization and its public. They function as a connexion between the health care organization and its external and internal publics with one foot inside the organization and another outside.

Public Relationship Channels

Communication is the channel along which a message or note is conveyed. Healthcare industry has varied audiences depending on the region they belong to or the language they speak. Each audience needs customized messages in

different tones and diverse use of language. There are a diverse communication channels available. Best is face-to-face conversation. Other modalities are also available such as telecommunication telephone, Microsoft teams, Google meet, e-mail, WhatsApp, BOTIM, etc. Specific task requires specific structured messages. Hospital discharge summaries and laboratory results constitute structured or formal messages. Voice mail and e-mail can also serve certain purposes and are informal messages, which have variable structures. Patient’s privacy and concerns are very important in health care industry. Unauthorized access to clinical records paints a poor picture of the hospital. Measures must be taken to protect privacy which may include encoding of messages to prevent unauthorized access. For example, mobile phone conversations should be protected and dissemination of soft copies of reports of medical investigations to the patients can be encrypted.

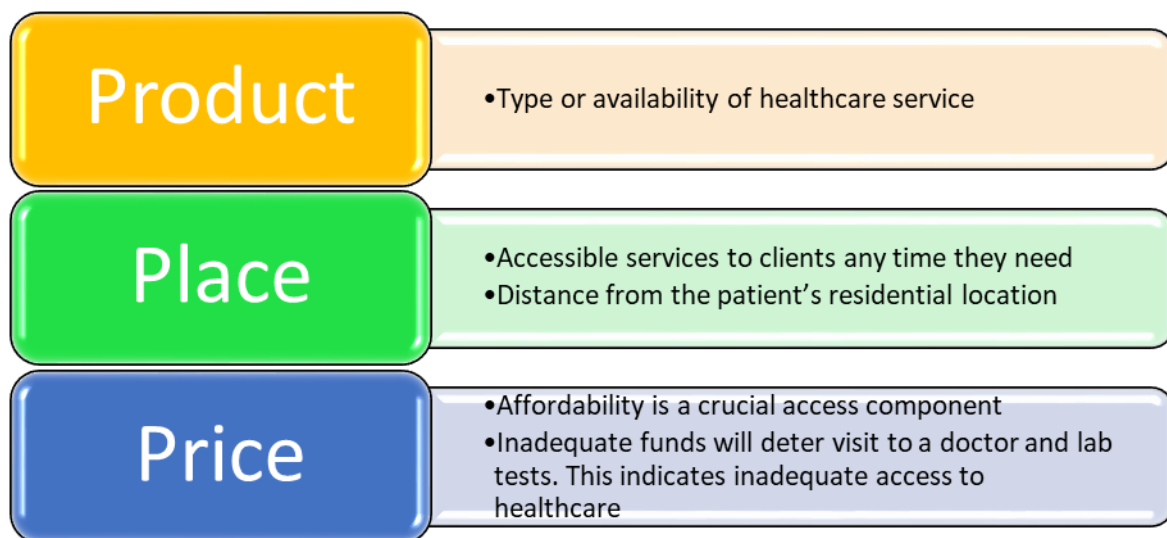
Patients’ Rights

Consideration of *patient’s rights* is an important factor, which includes:

1. Choice of health services.
2. Knowledge of one’s health.
3. Safe and healthy environment.
4. Access to health care.
5. Schemes related to Insurance and medical aid.
6. Confidentiality and privacy.
7. Informed consent.
8. Complaints about health services.

Patients’ Choice

The patient’s choice of a healthcare-setting is complex process and is a result of culmination of factors related to both health care providers and receivers. These factors can be discussed as the ten P’s of healthcare services marketing (**Fig. 2**).



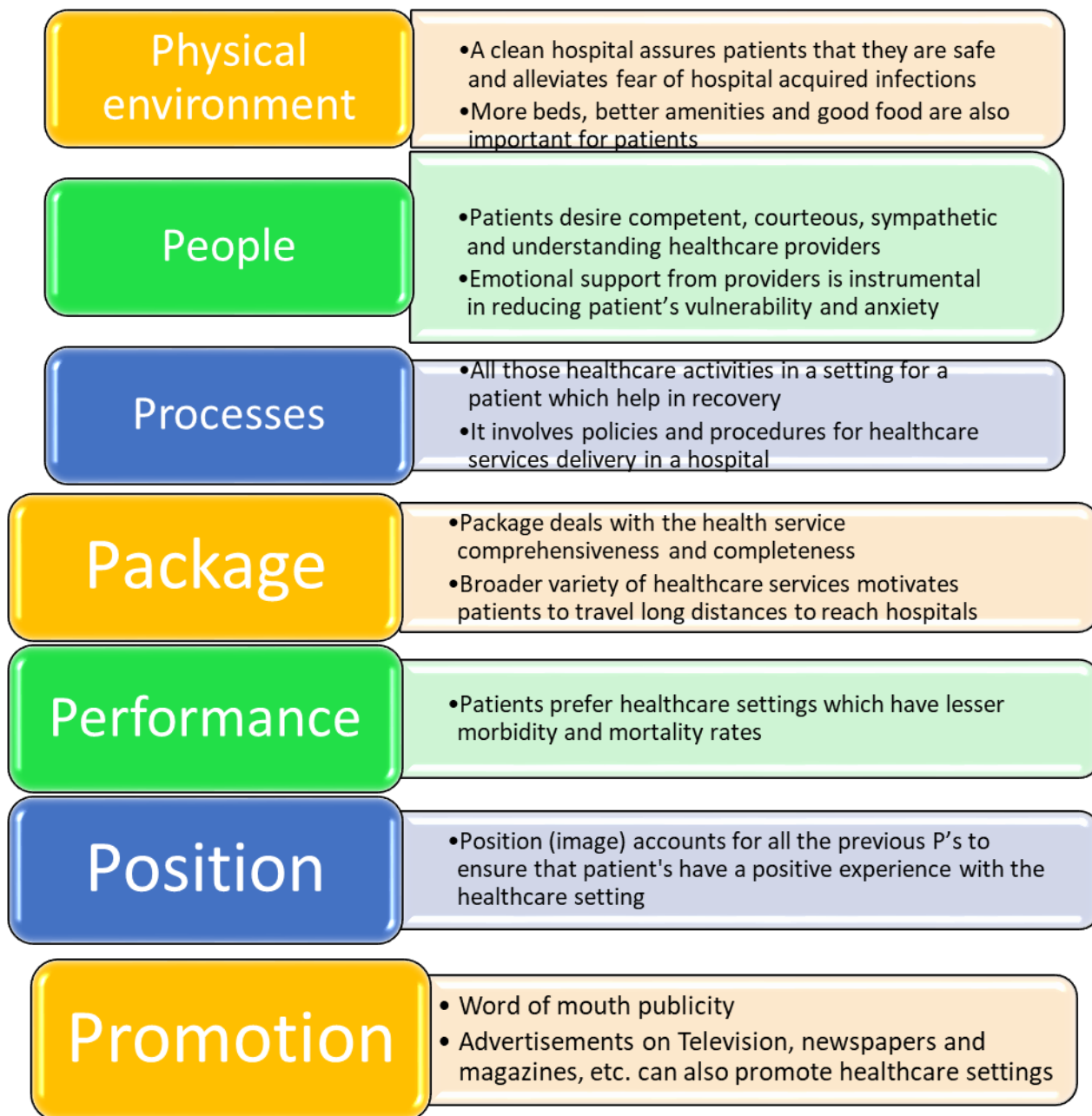


Fig. 2: The ten P's of healthcare services marketing which play a critical role in patient choice of healthcare services. (Adapted from Mosadeghrad, A.M.)¹⁴.

Limitations of Public Relations

Public relations as a communicative pathway holds *several key limitations*. Some of them are given below¹³:

1. **Uncertainty of information transmission:** Communications route offers no guarantees as to when they will reach audiences. Time of dissemination depends on media organizations that supervise specified communications platforms.
2. **Uncertainty of content presentation:** As editorial control rests with the presenting organizations, there might be a difference in the way of presentation adopted by the specified news media firms and may not be as anticipated. Minor modifications may result in distortion and may be a challenge.
3. **Uncertainty of return on investment:** If promotional events fail to secure adequate media coverage, this will result in weakened potential for the institution. Care should be taken to minimize it.

Conclusion

Introduction of public relations to health care marketing is relatively a new phenomenon. Public relations should not be left to only the PR Department rather it should be an integral part and adopted by everybody working in any healthcare institution for the accomplishment of the organization's objectives. The hospital is not an ivory tower capable of independent existence. Rather it is an integral part of the social system, influenced by both the external and internal environment with its own set of limitations. It is crucial for hospitals to deliver a decent quality of service while simultaneously the public in general should be educated regarding the related limitations. In any healthcare organization, the attitude and competence of the service personnel are vital for customer satisfaction. Negligence or insufficient attention to the needs of patient can consequently lead to patient discontentment and this may result to losing their loyalty and allegiance. Any amount of technological advancement

cannot replace the warmth, concern, awareness, sympathy, and compassion which are integral to the art and business of healing. Public relations programme as all public relations tasks, cannot be a sporadic activity but has to be ongoing process requiring novel strategies for strong brand building, maintaining trust with old customers and attract the new ones.

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