A Tale of Two Hospitals: Putting Best Practices to Work in an Integrated Health Care System

An organization-wide commitment to service excellence has paid off with satisfaction scores surging from well below the 25th percentile nationally to being well on the way to meeting MetroWest’s goal of the 75th percentile across services in 2009. The medical center is also meeting, and in some cases exceeding, national benchmarks for quality of care.

MetroWest Medical Center is a for-profit 420-bed, two-hospital regional health care system in suburban Boston. It is comprised of Framingham Union Hospital in Framingham, Mass., and Leonard Morse Hospital in Natick, Mass. MetroWest is owned by Vanguard Health Systems, which owns 15 hospitals in four states.

The Bottom Line
MetroWest Medical Center has partnered with Press Ganey for patient satisfaction surveys, data analysis, and improvement resources since 2006. An organization-wide commitment to service excellence, fostered by its leadership and owner Vanguard Health Systems, has paid off, with satisfaction scores surging from well below the 25th percentile nationally to being well on the way to meeting MetroWest’s goal of the 75th percentile across services in 2009. The medical center is also meeting, and in some cases exceeding, national benchmarks for quality of care.

The Back Story
MetroWest is comprised of two hospitals, seven miles apart, each with its own culture and history. Framingham Union Hospital is a teaching hospital located right outside a busy, multi-cultural downtown. It has a diverse medical staff and nurses are not unionized. In contrast, Leonard Morse Hospital is not a teaching facility. It is located in an established family neighborhood, in a wooded setting with pastures and farms surrounding it. The employees and physicians are very loyal to their hospital and many have been there a long time. Leonard Morse’s nursing staff is unionized.

Since 1996, MetroWest has experienced three changes in ownership. These frequent transitions have led to fluctuation in its overall commitment to service excellence. In 2006, a renewed focus was placed on service excellence by new owner Vanguard Health Systems. “Our goal was to reinforce and re-energize the organization around service excellence,” says Joe Mullany, president of Vanguard Health System’s Chicago and Massachusetts markets.
Building a New Culture

MetroWest has found what so many other successful health care providers have discovered: Measuring patient satisfaction is not enough to sustain improvement. An organization must commit to a culture of improvement. Such a culture is not something that one person or a group of administrators can simply decide to have. Service excellence has to be internalized and practiced by everyone in the organization, becoming something palpable to anyone entering the building. In addition, a culture is bred through continuous action and recognition of those actions that foster improvement. Slogans, campaigns and catchphrases alone will not create a culture committed to improvement.

MetroWest has established this culture through a variety of avenues. It starts with leadership. When the chief executive officer gets involved in process and service improvement, real change often begins. “I’ve worked with a lot of CEOs and believe that commitment to service excellence has to start at the top,” says Ruth Walton, regional chief nursing executive for Vanguard’s New England and Chicago markets. “Without a strong CEO and administrative team buy-in, you are essentially facing an uphill battle.” Andrei Soran, current CEO of MetroWest, possesses the kind of leadership needed to create a strong culture.

Soran is intimately involved in improving patient satisfaction. He is committed to communication, hosting a weekly blog, recording frequent global voice mails and e-mails, holding CEO forums with employees, mailing update letters to employees’ homes and rounding frequently at both hospitals. “Andrei has a deep respect for what it takes to create a great patient experience,” Walton says. “He was a caregiver himself and intuitively understands the patient-centered philosophy and what it means to a patient when they do not have an optimum experience. His practice as a physical therapist has made him passionate about service and the patient experience.”

The CEO cannot create a culture of service excellence alone. It requires the involvement of all administrators, as well as a coherent service action structure comprised of service improvement teams that look at data, develop and implement tactics, measure results, recognize high performers, and celebrate with departments and units when they have significantly moved their scores.

The importance that MetroWest places on creating a service excellence culture starts on an employee’s first day with an interactive and entertaining new-hire orientation focused on patient-centered care.

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“Inpatient Satisfaction on the Rise

MetroWest’s inpatient satisfaction program is multifaceted. It includes regular monitoring and analysis of the data, essential to long-term, sustainable improvement. Without regular monitoring, small issues can become larger problems. MetroWest leaders regularly review their reports from Press Ganey, which helps keep improvement a priority focus. Press Ganey’s online tool allows the medical center to drill down for data and analyze it, continuously monitor its performance, and benchmark the hospitals against other facilities, including its peer group.

Patient satisfaction scores are sent weekly via e-mail to managers to share with their staffs. Coherent and committed service teams made up of employees from both hospitals ensure cross-pollination of tactics. Each team submits a 90-day work plan to the service champion at monthly service team leader meetings.

More than mere scores are at play; the ethos of customer service now permeates everything MetroWest does.

One key area that has contributed to improvement in inpatient scores is the implementation of discharge phone calls to patients, called “Care Calls,” by Kim Kelley, a nurse director at MetroWest who leads the inpatient service action team. These calls are done by the staff on the unit where the patients had been cared for, a reassuring continuity in care. This clinical intervention provides the patient with another opportunity to review discharge instructions and new medication information and ask any additional questions. Using Press Ganey resources, staff members are able to track their success at completing these calls. MetroWest officials have noted a difference in overall satisfaction among those patients who received discharge calls versus those that did not.

MetroWest has an active reward and recognition program for employees who have played key roles in improvement. It ranges from delivering cupcakes decorated with excellent patient satisfaction scores to high-performing units to a CEO candlelight dinner with up to a dozen employees and their guests who have been nominated by their managers for outstanding customer service.

As a result of these efforts, inpatient scores have moved from the 30th to 37th percentile range to the 67th to 72nd percentile range. More than mere scores are at play; the ethos of customer service now permeates everything MetroWest does.

Once employees are here 90 days, we reinvest in them by inviting them to an original program created by MetroWest that dedicates eight hours entirely to service. We call it MetroWest YouUniversity,” says Stephanie Guidetti, RN, director of marketing for MetroWest. By starting off on the right foot, the organization builds the momentum for larger success.

Soran also takes the time to come to each new-hire orientation and speak to employees at length about his vision for MetroWest. He meets again with them after 90 days of employment to have an open dialogue about their experiences and what he can learn from them and vice versa.

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Success in the ED
One area where MetroWest’s improvement efforts have paid off tremendously is in its emergency departments, a key factor in the medical center’s success. Between both emergency departments, MetroWest sees over 64,000 patients a year.

Using data on each shift and time of day provided by Press Ganey, Janice Whitney, Framingham’s ED nurse director and leader of the ED service action team, was able to quickly identify opportunities for improvement. Whitney mails patient comments and satisfaction scores to team members’ homes. This allows them to read information away from the stressful work environment. She feels that once the staff hears and learns of patients’ concerns through their own voices it brings a level of attention and responsiveness that is beyond a numeric rating.

Whitney believes the “30-Minute Door-to-Doctor Program” instituted at both campuses is a huge satisfier to patients and their families. Patients greatly appreciate the timely and efficient care they are receiving. This type of program requires strong collaboration between nurses and physicians, who are aligned with meeting this goal for each patient who visits MetroWest EDs.

MetroWest’s 2006 ED patient satisfaction scores, which debuted in the 62nd and 67th percentile range three years ago, are now consistently above the 75th percentile.

From a business perspective, the high patient satisfaction with the EDs has had bottom-line ramifications. At Framingham, the number of patients leaving the ED without being seen has fallen from 1.61% to 1.38% through the first quarter of 2009, and in March alone it fell to its lowest rate yet, 1.18%.

An Outpatient Turnaround
Prior to contracting with Press Ganey, MetroWest’s outpatient services were performing in the bottom half of the national database at both hospitals. At Framingham, the situation was worse; a reflection of the fact that its outpatient services are not just provided at the hospital but at a number of remote locations as well. Framingham’s scores were below the 10th percentile nationally in 2007, while Leonard Morse’s was hovering around the 40th percentile.

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RN, director of Marketing

Deb Bitsoli, chief operating officer at Framingham and leader of the outpatient service action team, created a culture of transparency by sharing department-specific data and scores openly at weekly meetings of the outpatient satisfaction team. As was done for the ED, the Press Ganey consultant helped the team identify which area, day, shift, and provider presented opportunities for improvement.

A Helping Hand on Regulatory Issues
Patient satisfaction has implications for hospitals’ finances. To receive full payment from Medicare for inpatient services, hospitals must submit certain quality measures to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, including those regarding patient satisfaction. The results are then publicly reported on CMS’ Hospital Compare web site. In February 2009, MetroWest achieved 100% compliance with acute myocardial infarction core measures and hit benchmarks for all heart failure and surgical care improvement program core measures and all but one of the pneumonia core measures.

On patient satisfaction, Press Ganey’s quality improvement solution integrates the Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems tool with Press Ganey’s quality improvement questions. This allows for greater depth of analysis and insight into the patient perception of care.

“When looking and comparing the HCAHPS and the Press Ganey instruments, Press Ganey has done an amazing job. There is a trailing effect with the published HCAHPS comparative data," Walton says. “Press Ganey, because it has so many clients, is able to provide concurrent benchmarking of HCAHPS results so we don’t have to wait months to see how we are doing against our peers.”

With the many complicated and changing requirements of HCAHPS surveying, Press Ganey is able to provide MetroWest and its other clients with the most up-to-date information to avoid costly errors in public reporting, Guidetti says. “Helping us understand HCAHPS is so important. Pay-for-performance is on the horizon and HCAHPS is going to become more important and more high profile. Press Ganey’s guidance has been incredibly helpful.”
A Partnership with Press Ganey

The consultant relationship is key to making the most of the vast array of Press Ganey’s services. It started with the initial site visit to provide training on the Press Ganey resources. “That (initial training) has been an invaluable resource because the whole technical aspect of understanding the data and how to use the data was a huge challenge for everybody,” Guidetti says. The consultant has made several visits to MetroWest hospitals to provide training and support for their improvement efforts and is also available via phone and e-mail to address immediate needs. “We feel comfortable picking up the phone at any given time and talking with our consultant,” Guidetti says.

“Our consultant was very patient with us looking at how we identified patients and set-up the survey so we got the information that we needed,” she says. By assisting MetroWest to more specifically identify its patient population, it was able to get down to the department level by patient name and date of visit and assess each patient’s experience of care, leading to more fully informed improvement efforts.

The Press Ganey account executive has also been extensively involved in MetroWest’s success, Walton says. “He made a presentation regarding the data to the medical staff and other members of the administrative team. He gave us a high-level overview of strategies and tactics at corporate meetings, showing us what areas were improving and what was working for us. He presented information we had been sharing, but it was very powerful to have someone from Press Ganey giving that message,” she says. “He is a trusted resource and is just a phone call away.”

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Conclusion

Achieving excellence in service and quality isn’t an easy undertaking. It’s an everyday, organization-wide commitment, from the CEO to the front-line caregiver, something to strive for in every patient encounter. It must be bred into the DNA of everyone who works in a health care facility, starting the day of new-hire orientation.

And yet, for organizations such as MetroWest Medical Center, it is also a winning strategy. Patients are comforted during a very vulnerable time knowing that the organization is aligned around what is important to them. Employees are more engaged in an organization where patients praise the care they receive and administrators provide positive feedback for jobs well done. And the organization benefits from a best-in-class reputation that continues to attract new patients. Working in partnership with Press Ganey, organizations like MetroWest achieve their goals of becoming — and staying — leaders within their markets.