After “The Match,” a First Lesson

At Oregon Health & Science University, doctors are indoctrinated early to a culture of service excellence

Vital Statistics
Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU) in Portland, Ore., is Oregon’s only academic medical center. OHSU operates two hospitals, the main OHSU Hospital and OHSU Doernbecher Children’s Hospital, and numerous medical practice locations providing care for about 755,000 patient visits each year. As one of only two Level 1 trauma centers in the state of Oregon, OHSU provides emergency care for patients across the state and throughout the region; its four schools — medicine, nursing, dentistry and pharmacy — draw students from across the nation.

The Bottom Line
The 2007 arrival of John Ma, MD, as chairman of OHSU’s Department of Emergency Medicine marked a new emphasis on service excellence for both front-line staff and medical residents. All incoming residents now receive a letter discussing the role of service excellence in the ED, are trained on customer service principles their first day at the hospital and shadow a patient through the entirety of a single ED visit. By training residents, Ma hopes to spread best practices in service excellence to other institutions.

Other aspects of the OHSU ED’s service improvement campaign include: a department-wide interdisciplinary service excellence committee, scripting at triage, follow-up phone calls to high-risk patients and others and doctors handing their business cards to patients in case they have questions following discharge. Despite a recent fall-off of scores that may be attributable to record ED volume and the aftermath of layoffs in the economic downturn, the overall trend for patient satisfaction at OHSU has been highly positive.

The Back Story
“At OHSU we have adopted a culture of ‘always.’ I promise that our department will always do what is necessary to provide you with first-rate medical training and that you will graduate with all the necessary skills to practice as an outstanding emergency physician. One of the skills that will be strongly emphasized throughout your three years at OHSU is service excellence. The patient always comes first in the OHSU emergency department. Providing high quality and safe patient care is always our No. 1 priority. In the process, we always look to provide an outstanding experience for the patient and their family. The service excellence principles that you will learn will serve you well throughout your medical career.”

— John Ma, MD, chairman of the Department of Emergency Medicine, OHSU Hospital

Those words are the first introduction of physicians-in-training to the OHSU Hospital emergency department. Ma sends them out in a welcome letter just after “The Match,” the third Thursday in March each year when medical students are assigned to residency programs across the country. The letter has been so successful that other health systems have asked for copies of it.

“Dr. Ma wants to establish service expectations before residents even arrive,” said Kim Bass, director of Service Excellence at OHSU Healthcare. “On their first day here, emergency medicine residents are also engaged in a lecture and discussion about customer service principles — including communication with patients and co-workers — all of which sets the tone for their educational experience at OHSU.”
The emphasis on service doesn’t end with orientation, though. Starting this July, new OHSU residents are required to follow one patient through the entirety of the patient’s ED stay – from the moment he first arrives in the waiting room to the time he is ultimately discharged.

“If the patients are waiting three hours, so are the residents,” Bass says. “Being on the other side of the care experience helps residents understand the long wait times and uncertainty that can sometimes characterize an ED visit, and that ability to empathize is just as important as learning medical skills.”

These resident-focused efforts are just one component of a department-wide service improvement campaign started by Ma in 2007. When he arrived at OHSU, the ED’s national percentile ranking for overall assessment of care was in the single digits. OHSU Hospital was beginning to focus on patient satisfaction across the organization, so Ma created his own service excellence group – co-chaired by a nurse and a physician, with interdisciplinary membership – just for the ED.

As a clinician and educator at an academic health center, Ma is also a big believer in data. Press Ganey monthly reports are shared with all faculty and residents and service excellence cases are presented at mortality and morbidity reviews. “The questions we’re constantly asking ourselves,” says Ma, “are ‘What can we do differently next time? How can we make improvement continuous over time?’”

Review of the data have led the ED’s service excellence group to implement a number of initiatives, including post-discharge follow-up phone calls to patients, scripting for conversations such as triage interviews, an ED expeditor program to keep patients up-to-date on delays and comment cards distributed at discharge.

Most of these changes may begin by addressing patient satisfaction, but end up touching on both clinical quality and employee engagement. Post-discharge phone calls, for instance, are made by an RN to all high-risk patients and at random to other patients.

“The calls address patient safety first: we want to make sure patients understand and are complying with their discharge instructions,” Bass says, “but we also want to know if there were service opportunities we missed or individuals at OHSU whose excellent performance needs to be recognized.”

Scripting for conversations, asking patients to fill out comment cards at discharge and having physicians and residents give out their business cards to patients are all efforts designed to address one of the most common issues in OHSU’s Press Ganey Priority Index: “Response to concerns and complaints.”

“Patient responses on that issue may not be about complaints,” points out Bass, “it may just mean they had a question they were afraid to ask. Scripting – so we can consistently ask patients if they have questions – comment cards, and passing out our physicians’ business cards are all ways to make sure that we’re responding to concerns as they arise, and also recognizing outstanding service. ”

Bass, who experienced OHSU’s ED as a patient when she was in an auto accident, says she was pleased to see the results of the department’s focus on service. “All of the things we’ve worked on as an organization, and the things Dr. Ma’s focused on in the ED specifically, were on display,” she says. “The ED physician introduced himself, explained the tests they were going to run, made it clear I could call him with any questions and thoroughly explained discharge instructions. I left the ED with the physician’s business card, having completed a comment card and knowing exactly who to contact if I had questions – it was the kind of care that made me really proud to be part of OHSU.”