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Dental Service in Italy: an organizational change action of the public health service

INTRODUCTION

In this particular moment of economic crisis for the National Health Service, the Public Dental Service is affected by a higher stereotyped and prejudiced perception compared to other medical specialities, and in particular to the private dental service.

It becomes essential for the public service to perform an effective change to adapt its quality level to private service standards, not only by training its staff applying a specific formative approach and by improving structure standards, but also through a marketing action aimed to promote the public structure image.

OBJECTIVES

The objective of this research is to study patients' perception of both private and public dental services, the most relevant quality factors for patient's satisfaction with dental services and the best ways to communicate with patients.

ABSTRACT

The **purpose** of this research is to promote a radical organizational change in public health service in order to improve service quality and image responding to the consumer's needs. The starting point of the present analysis is the urgent need to compare private dental surgery service and public dental service, in order to identify areas of organizational change in the scope of public service.

METHOD & SUBJECT

The **sample** consists of 822 subjects from private and public sector, 36 subjects involved in focus groups, 6 subjects interviewed.

The **techniques** used are: focus groups and in-depth interviews with target clients. Face-to-face interviews and on-line questionnaires.

We follow a process of information triangulation (Denzin 1978) designing a mixed research (Bryman, 2008), in this contribute we present mainly the quantitative data.

RESULTS

This study has shown the strategic operation elements that affect the perception of the effectiveness and quality of the doctor-patient relationship and of the service offered, as well as how these elements correlate with general satisfaction (Clow et al., 1995). Focus group results show that the quality of the service mainly depends on the quality of the relationship. These results showing clearly the importance of the relationship with the dentist and the nurses in patient's satisfaction. As a matter of fact, satisfaction, apart from depending on treatment effectiveness (Di Matteo, McBride, Shugars e O'Neil, 1995), also appears to be more affected by the quality of the relationship than by other structural or technical factors.

DISCUSSION

The results of the data analysis revealed four operation areas in which action is needed to improve public services in order to meet consumer's expectations and needs.

"**Due factors**" such as comfort, booking time, punctuality, are the baseline of good service and have a small impact on quality perception. For these items, dentists should ensure an adequate performance, whereas any increase beyond average performance seems to have no effect.

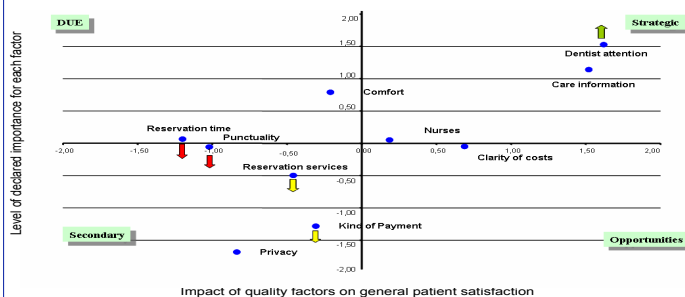
"**Secondary factors**" such as the respect of privacy, the mode of payment, the booking services, have a low impact on general patient satisfaction. Since patients are not very much concerned with these aspects, dentists should pay adequate but not excessive attention to them.

"**Strategic factors**" include dentist chair-side manner, care information, nurses. They have a high impact on the general satisfaction of the patient who considers them as very important, so that they influence the level of customer loyalty. Dentists should pay careful attention to these factors because a bad performance could imply a loss of patients.

"**Opportunity factors**", such as clarity of costs, are elements that appear to have a strong impact on the satisfaction experience, although customers themselves seem to be less aware of them. By working "behind the scenes" these factors may represent both "opportunities" and possible "threats". For these factors, dentist practices not only have to deliver an excellent performance, but also need to improve explicit communication, with the goal of increasing patients' awareness of the valuable service they receive. This is the area that presents the greatest opportunities for health care services (Mazzei, Russo, Crescentini, 2008).

The figure below shows the crossing of the impact of each quality factor related to general patient satisfaction with the importance of the same factors stated by patients.

Importance and satisfaction referring to each quality factor in dentistry and in the dental care division



CONCLUSION

The analysis leads to a clearer awareness of the competitive levers that dentists can manage today. First of all, many "strategic" and "opportunity" quality factors are available to dentists, to be explored with the aim of gaining a competitive advantage. Second, dental practitioners can leverage implicit and explicit communication subsequent to successful treatments, doctor-patient relations, clear and complete information and referrals of current patients".

In conclusion, regarding the public body in charge for healthcare services, it is worth to underline the importance of customer satisfaction evaluation, which can play a key role in orienting managerial action, especially when it is combined with the use of result interpreting instruments, such as the quality factor maps processed in this research. Relational aspects are fundamental in the value chain of dental practices and structural and technical factors should support them. Furthermore, paying attention to the reasons that underlie the choice of a dentist is a competitive lever. In particular, patients appreciate value arising from: the return on investment based on an analysis of the costs and benefits (one of the variables that most worry patients); attention to time and scheduling, being time the most important value for many people; adequate explanation of actual risks related to treatment while reassuring patients who experienced similar cases in the past.

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