

Customer or patient? – May 2009

In today's healthcare marketplace the words Customer and Patient seem to be increasingly applied in a random, haphazard way to describe the person being treated.

It is not an insignificant debate. The word itself is not as important as the reasons you may choose to use one or the other. In all probability, your choice, if you make one, will partly define your values, beliefs and professional intentions. There seems to be two schools of thought from my experience in meeting with consultants up and down the country.

There are clear advocates for exclusively using the word patient. To these doctors using terms like customer or consumer cheapens the relationship between them and the sick or injured person. They view themselves as medical practitioners and not business people. In their eyes even, business-minded doctors have lost their way and forgotten the honourable reasons they entered into medicine and took the Hippocratic Oath.

Then there are doctors, who understand and embrace the use of customer but not to the exclusion of patient. These consultants are more likely to view their private practice as a business. They are more open-minded about business terminology and its significance on their behaviour and they try and understand the consumer-driven behaviour of their patients. They feel the need to protect their interests in a world where patients have more choice, are therefore more demanding and unfortunately less likely to show loyalty as a result.

We are witnessing a rapid "corporatisation" of healthcare, where less and less can be taken for granted, where there is a premium for pro-activity and a price to pay for reactivity. In the eye of this storm are patients. As potential patients we don't care what we are called as long as the doctor and his or her team recognise that we want to be valued, that we have needs and expectations that we want met and that we are not being patronised in any way.

So my advice to you all is not to get tied up in words and terminology but to concentrate wholeheartedly on creating a patient-doctor relationship built on mutual respect, trust and openness, with each and every one of your patients. If you don't then our consumer reflex will be to go elsewhere with our medical problem and therefore our money. Embrace the following five principles instead:

Individuality – treat each patient as the only one in the world and as an individual, who will not necessarily have the same expectations as another or the same perception of doctors. Make them feel welcome, valued and special. So remember birthdays and any other personal information that you obtain and you can use at a later date (holidays, kid's graduation etc). Go the extra mile even if it puts you out for a while.

Empowerment – the patient needs to feel involved and that they have a say. Today's patients are well-informed and will have deeply researched their condition so respect their need to question and clarify their treatment, and in some cases expect debate!

Honesty – admit mistakes and oversight and show that you are genuinely sorry for any inconvenience. Don't try and justify the unjustifiable!

Relationship – we as patients do not understand or care if a practice is too busy. Don't disassociate practice activities from your relationship with the patient. ALL activities, which take place in a practice, are undertaken for the patient's benefit first and foremost.

Leading by example – You are pivotal in the patient relationship but you are not alone. Ensure you treat your team, your secretary, assistant, practice manager, as you would expect them to treat your patients. You need to set the standards and make sure the appropriate attitudes are passed across to your team.

Where both the words patient and customer could be accepted by all is when they prefix the word "relationship". This determination to create relationships is what should shape your every move as you drive towards building a successful practice. If a patient feels you have met their expectations and that the experience was good, you have built a strong foundation. If not then the "customer" within us will take over and you may lose us as a patient very quickly. In conclusion and to use an old cliché - if you don't look after your customer your competition will.