Where We Are Going and Why

Effective patient relations processes are important drivers of quality improvement. Patient relations includes engaging patients and caregivers in improving how health care settings gather and respond to feedback, concerns, and complaints (hospital, home and community care, and long-term care) for a range of populations (patients, residents, clients, and their families and friends).\(^1\)

The Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care has committed to improving patient relations through recent and upcoming amendments to the "Excellent Care for All Act," and priorities set out in the Patients First: Action Plan for Health Care. The legislative changes set clear patient relations accountabilities for hospitals, establish the Patient Ombudsman, and expand Health Quality Ontario’s mandate. Specifically, Health Quality Ontario will begin measuring and reporting on patient relations indicators, and supporting quality improvement in patient relations processes in hospitals, home and community care, and long-term care homes.

"It’s important for me to know that I was heard and how my complaint was handled. I want to know that the person I voice my complaint to can do something about it, and there is a system to support improving my care." - Patient

Where We Are Now

In preparation for this expanded role in measurement and quality improvement, Health Quality Ontario developed a Patient Relations Measurement and Reporting Plan that was submitted to the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care in Spring 2016. An environmental scan, consultations within Ontario and other jurisdictions, a multi-sector survey and a provincial advisory group informed the recommendations.

The multi-sector survey was designed to understand how hospitals, Community Care Access Centres, and long-term care homes handle complaints. The survey results revealed that complaints data is collected across these sectors, with important differences in the quality and types of data collected, software and storage used, and performance tracking and reporting. In addition to highlighting current practices, the survey results indicated areas where sectors saw an opportunity for improvement and additional support (Box 1). Summary findings from the surveys are available here.

Box 1. The multi-sector survey highlighted the following areas for additional support:

- Standardization in data, metrics, and definitions of complaint categories.
- Templates to facilitate implementation of best practices.
- Training resources.

---

The Patient Relations Advisory Group guided the selection of patient relations indicators (Box 2) and standard complaint categories (Box 3) to support comparable measurement and public reporting. This provincial group also informed quality improvement tools and the recommended data collection and reporting approach.

Health Quality Ontario’s recommendations include voluntary pilot testing the set of four priority indicators and complaint categories across a small group of hospitals, Community Care Access Centres, and long-term care homes. The pilot would inform refinement, change management requirements, and quality improvement supports in advance of full implementation.

To support patient relations quality improvement and recent legislation specific to hospitals, Health Quality Ontario released two guides. Engaging with Patients and Caregivers about Patient Relations: A Guide for Hospitals details how Ontario hospitals can engage patients and their caregivers in the development of effective and inclusive patient relations/complaints handling processes. Striving for Excellence in Patient Relations Processes in Ontario's Hospitals: A Guide to Responding to Ontario Regulation 188/15 provides a step-by-step approach to driving improvement through the implementation of best practices that align with the regulation.

What Is Next

Health Quality Ontario, in consultation with the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, confirmed the need to pilot the patient relations measures and reporting. The pilot will begin in Summer 2016 and will inform wider implementation. Engagement with patients, residents, hospitals, Community Care Access Centres, and long-term care homes will be planned, in partnership with associations, to inform pilot testing.

In Summer 2016, Health Quality Ontario will also release a long-term care guidance tool to support effective implementation of resident engagement processes and other best practices in resident relations. Through this work, Health Quality Ontario is building a learning culture in partnership with patients, residents, hospitals, Community Care Access Centres, long-term care homes and associations. The goal is that patient and resident relations data can be combined with patient experience data to inform positive change, and provide the impetus to improve care locally and across the health system. For more information on patient relations at Health Quality Ontario, or to participate in this work, please contact pt_rel@HQOntario.ca.