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Local hospitals jump on national train of improved customer service

The staff of Eastern Idaho Regional Medical Center would like to know what you hate about hospitals, so they can fix it. And they are far from the only hospital, locally or nationally, with that goal. According to a 2010 survey, 93 percent of responding health care workers said that "patient experience" was one of their institution's top five priorities.

The survey, administered by health care business research body HealthLeaders Media Intelligence Unit, also reported that 72 percent of respondents saw that priority level increase over the past year in their institution.



Alisha Humphreys checks on patient Ranae Torres on Wednesday morning at Eastern Idaho Regional Medical Center. Area hospitals are making a push to improve patient satisfaction.

At EIRMC, that's certainly true, spokeswoman Cindy Smith-Putnam said. "It's our primary focus," she said. "We want to make sure that the experience we give patients matches the care we give them."

Patient experience is a nebulous concept, part customer service, part communication and part basic efficiency and transparency. At EIRMC, 11 different teams have between two and nine new practices they're charged with initiating throughout the hospital. They range from holding consultations between a nurse going off duty and his or her replacement in front of a patient to the time-honored comment card.

All were conceived with the end goal of smoothing out aspects of the average hospital stay.

Most of the innovations, or at least the concept behind them, may seem obvious to anyone familiar with the business world. In the world of hospitals, however, quality of care traditionally has been the driving force rather than quality of the experience overall, according to the report on the HealthLeaders survey.

As the shift takes hold in eastern Idaho, patients are noticing. Kellie Black of Rexburg is no stranger to Madison Memorial Hospital. She's had two children there, and in February, her mother was admitted for shoulder surgery.

"It isn't that anyone was rude or inconsiderate before," Black said. "But this time around it seemed like there was a conscious effort to be polite and considerate."

The widespread nature of the change is evident at Bingham Memorial Hospital in Blackfoot. As one of few area hospitals licensed to put on mandatory continuing education events for doctors, Bingham's event staffers must have an ear to the ground on health care trends.

Cassey Troshynski coordinates continuing education seminars for the hospital. This year, she said she has tried to include a patient experience element in the seminars. That was clear in a June seminar about potential changes in the health care industry in the face of retiring baby boomers. While the seminar included several doctors, keynote speaker Alan Parris came from the world of business.

"You have to know something about the populations you're working with, not just the science end of it," Parris said. "Your patients have choices in health care, so if you want to be their choice, you have to think from their point of view."

Smith-Putnam gave much the same analysis when asked about EIRMC's recent push to improve patient experience, calling it part of the hospital's effort to be the "clear and only" choice for health care in the region. "We need to put ourselves in the head space and heart space of our patients," she said.