Speaking up: Resolving NHS complaints and preventing problems from recurring

In brief

When a patient or their loved ones are dissatisfied with a healthcare experience, they can make a formal complaint. But the process can be daunting, distressing and frustrating; the NHS’s response is too often defensive and there is little attempt to use complaints constructively as a driver for improvement.

This project seeks to transform the current complaints system, creating greater transparency, scrutiny and independence and building a new relationship between the local community and the trust through a new “complaints advocate” role.

It will ensure that learning from complaints is harnessed and used to improve future care by recording complainants’ ‘patient voices’ – reflective digital stories of patient care for use as teaching resources.

Why is this project needed?

This project seeks to focus on three problem areas:

- the lack of information, support and other mechanisms to help complainants achieve a satisfactory outcome;
- the lack of external review of complaints handling and the isolation of trusts in reviewing their own performance; and
- the tendency for healthcare organisations to respond defensively rather than responsively to complaints.

Project team

This project is led by the Patients Association, partnered by the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust (Mid Staffs) alongside Pilgrim Projects and the National Confidential Enquiry into Patient Outcomes and Deaths (NCEPOD).

In 2009 serious failings in care were reported at Mid Staffs. The trust has become the subject of intense local, national and international media scrutiny into what has been described as ‘the biggest scandal in the NHS’.

The trust faces a considerable challenge to improve the quality of care it delivers, and to rebuild trust with its local community. It approached the Patients Association to discuss the possibility of working together, and agreed to be a partner for this project focusing on complaints.
The project leads from each organisation will form a steering group to develop the delivery plan, and then the project leads from Mid Staffs, the Patients Association and Pilgrim Projects will form the active project management team. They will liaise and communicate as necessary, and through quarterly updates.

Aims

This project seeks to enable complainants to have their voice heard, and to support trusts to translate that voice into genuine improvements in care. Its ultimate goal is to transform the nature of the dynamic to one of equality, transparency and organisational learning.

It sets out to do this through three separate activities:

- Making the complaints process as positive as possible for individuals, by employing trained complaints advocates to play a lead role in complaints handling. They will be senior figures recruited from outside the trust – ideally from the local community – to encourage transparency and independence and reduce the current inequalities.
- Improving the independence, rigour and validity of complaints investigation through regular expert sample reviews of complaints handling and performance measurement. This will help trusts develop improved complaints handling and reduce the isolation of the trust in reviewing its own performance, as there is currently limited external measurement and analysis.
- Ensuring that learning from complaints is harnessed and used to improve future care. It will do this by working with Pilgrim Projects to help some complainants record ‘patient voices’ – reflective digital stories of patient care for use as teaching resources.

Activities

The project will put in place an expert panel and a number of advocates – people who have a strong background in this area, experience of advocacy for patients, and a passion for improving the experience of patients.

These will provide regular feedback on complaints procedures, which will be represented to the trust board and monitored within each of the trust’s five strategic themes.

This feedback will include ongoing information about how individuals feel their complaint is being handled. Each complainant who is assigned an advocate will be asked to complete an evaluation form with quantitative and qualitative elements, to measure improvements in complaints handling across the period. Improvement will also be measured through a survey of all complainants to the trust, comparing satisfaction rates of those who have been allocated an advocate with those who have not.
NCEOPOD will provide feedback and development support to help the team determine its methodology, to ensure that assessment and recommendations for improvement are delivered as effectively as possible.

An important part of the programme is to develop ‘board to ward’ (and vice versa) ownership and learning from complaints.

The ‘patient voices’ digital stories will be a key factor in helping the trust understand the ways in which it did not get things right, using narrative as well as data to bring the issues to life. These will be developed into presentations with supporting material to highlight key issues, to be used in teaching seminars.

**Outcomes**

‘This project will ensure that when people experience difficult circumstances of care with which they are not satisfied, they will not feel alone or up against the bureaucracy of the NHS without help, or a sense that no one is on their side,’ explains Kieran Mullan of the Patients Association.

‘The advocates will provide critical evaluation and support, and the video diaries will provide an opportunity to describe their feelings.’

‘Meanwhile for trusts the project will create a cultural shift that will attach more importance to complaints as an opportunity to learn and improve the quality of care, and the real-life video diaries will strengthen their learning and engagement.’

‘My greatest hope is that as a result of the project NHS organisations will place a much, much greater emphasis on complaints as an experience for the individual that has to be as positive as possible and a source of learning, to help them improve on the care they deliver.’