

Is Your Hospital Culturally Competent?

By Howard Ross, for HealthLeaders News, Sept. 28, 2005

Today, persons of color comprise about one third of the U.S. population. By the year 2050, various ethnic groups and persons of color in the U.S. will total just over half (51.1 percent) of the population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Close to 90 percent of our total population growth will have come from high birth rates of persons of color and historic levels of immigration.

The census projection emphasizes what many have already realized: providing healthcare services to persons who act, talk, relate, dress and eat differently from what we have often considered the "mainstream" will become far more commonplace. Continued immigration into the U.S., along with increases in the population of various cultural groups, means that more patients with different cultural customs, beliefs and practices will enter into the healthcare delivery system. This brings with it a unique and complex set of challenges for providers.

Culture shock

While healthcare is a universal concept that exists in every cultural group, cultures vary in the ways they perceive health and illness and how care is given. Culture is a predominant force in shaping an individual's health and response to illness. For this reason, hospitals must not only provide excellent patient care, they must also be proficient in "cultural competency," the understanding of different cultures and customs.

Some hospital leaders understand the importance of being culturally competent and have responded by hiring more multilingual staff and interpreters, and providing diversity training to help staff members understand their patients' different backgrounds. Some changes are even required by the Department of Health and Human Services' Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services standards. These are important steps, however, they are only the beginning of preparing for the

reality of a multicultural and multilingual patient population and workforce.

Cultural benefits

In healthcare, the benefits can be much more significant, since in the industry, the business case accounts for more than return on investment. It translates to the "top line" of optimal patient care and the "bottom line" of business growth and sustainability. Healthcare organizations can potentially see the following in addressing diversity and cultural competency in their organizations:

Top line

1. Better patient care

In healthcare, the bottom line is providing excellent care to patients. Although cost always has to be considered, people are No. 1. Many reports have indicated that ethnic minority providers generally care for more minority patients than their non-minority counterparts. Also, ethnic minority patients are more likely to be compliant and comfortable with a provider who can speak their language and/or understands their culture.

2. Reducing health disparities

Racial and ethnic minorities have higher rates of poor health outcomes than whites in the case of most diseases, even when controlling for various factors such as income, employment status and insurance coverage. Cultural bias is one contributor to this, according to the Institute of Medicine's groundbreaking 2002 report, *Unequal Treatment: Confronting Racial/Ethnic Disparities in Health Care*. A diverse and culturally competent workforce could help reduce health disparities.

Bottom line

1. **Recruit and retain diverse professional talent**

Diverse organizations and companies are seeing the benefits of having a diverse work force. Diversity and management talent go hand in hand. The most talented people seek to work for organizations that are committed to providing the best-quality services. They know that an organization that reflects its customers does just that.

2. **Improve market share**

Patients of color are the fastest growing population of healthcare consumers. Communities that include particular cultural groups tend to patronize service providers that represent them, that understand and respond to them and appreciate their differences. As the population becomes more diverse, the providers that meet the needs of those diverse patients will become their providers of choice.

3. **Lower healthcare costs**

Disease management has been implemented as part of many patient care plans to improve care and reduce costs. Diversity and cultural competence programs can reduce cost through better communication with patients regarding their risks and self-care. While this is the case for providers and employers, it is also such for all taxpayers and those paying insurance premiums. If usage increases for an employer as a result of untreated chronic conditions, the pool of payors pays more.

4. **Avoid legal issues**

Failure to understand differences of culture or custom may lead to lawsuits. While this may or may not be warranted, the opportunities for a lawsuit increase with even the perception that care is not provided equally.

5. **Compliance with accrediting bodies**

The HHS Office of Minority Health has implemented standards for culturally and linguistically appropriate services. JCAHO is also exploring ways to incorporate cultural and linguistic competence. While JCAHO's evaluation is not meant to find fault,

incorporating standards into the evaluation could serve as a great opportunity for organizations to improve their cultural proficiency and, simultaneously, meet their business obligations.

6. **Expand the future work force pipeline**

With the current work force shortage, the need for more people to choose the health professions (particular nursing and allied health) is overwhelming. Encouraging and promoting diversity sends a message to ethnic minority students in your community that the health professions are a place where they can make a difference, particularly by seeing professionals they can emulate.

7. **Good business sense**

I've mentioned that understanding different patients' cultures can have a positive impact on a hospital's bottom line. Additionally, successful hospitals understand the need for a highly skilled and diverse work force. Since the overall work force is also consistently diversifying and healthcare costs are skyrocketing, large employers will increasingly scrutinize their health plans and providers to ensure they have the caretakers and services that meet the needs of their employee population. Health plans also will want to make sure their hospital providers reflect their communities. The process is good for all involved, particularly the patient.

Hospitals are beginning to understand the importance of cultural competency, from a business and patient satisfaction standpoint. They have employed diversity coordinators, seek diversity training for executive and patient care employees and are hiring more interpreters. Those hospitals that prepare for cultural diversity now are better equipped to provide excellent care and service. Employers will choose them as their provider. Insurers will enlist them. And the community will support them. The healthcare providers who don't respond to this growing need will be left behind.

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