Executive Summary

The Role of Cultural Competence in Delivering Positive Patient Experiences

This white paper visits the importance of cultural competence and cultural sensitivity in the healthcare sector and how they impact the experience of patients, their families and support groups. In the healthcare setting human beings are often found at their most vulnerable. Beyond their expectation of healing, they are looking for a caring gesture, comforting look or kind word. It must be realized that these simple desired actions are not the same for everyone.

Over the past decade, the importance of cultural competence as a critical facet for the provision of high quality health care has risen. Cultural competence has been defined in the context of healthcare delivery, specifically focusing on the provider-patient interaction. The issue of cultural competence and awareness is critical due to the increasingly changing demographics in the United States and around the world. This results in diverse patient populations from different racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Today, in the United States, 27% of the total population is an ethnic and/or racial minority. In addition, 12.6% of the total U.S. population is foreign born; of these, 53.6% are from Latin America and 26% are from Asia (according to the 2007 American Community Survey). While these numbers are not the primary reason to focus on cultural competence, they are important to consider as key factors in why the healthcare industry must be prepared to manage an increasingly diverse patient population.

Some critical focal points in beginning to address cultural competence should include:
• Recognizing the value of and building respect for individual differences
• Understanding the basics of racial/ethnic distinctions and disparities
• Improving communication skills and cooperation in cross-cultural patient interactions
• Improving cross-cultural communications between healthcare professionals themselves

Cultural competence is a developmental process. Beyond awareness of subtle expectations or assumptions, there is a need for knowledge about different cultural norms, lifestyle needs, and personal preferences of individuals from different groups.

The ultimate goal in implementing a cultural competence focus should be a healthcare system and supporting workforce that can deliver the highest quality of care to every patient, regardless of race, ethnicity, cultural background, or language proficiency. As much as organizations can plan for and train on cultural competence, it is a personal issue and a choice each person must make. Examining cultural competence and the patient experience reveals the power of the personal relationships that are central to the healthcare process.

To download the complete paper and access other patient experience resources, visit www.theberylinstitute.org.

About The Beryl Institute

The Beryl Institute is the global community of practice and premier thought leader on improving the patient experience. The Institute defines the patient experience as “the sum of all interactions, shaped by an organization’s culture, that influence patient perceptions across the continuum of care.”

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