Five-star service in an endoscopy unit

When a customer walks into a 5-star hotel, they expect service. Not good service, but fabulous service.

That’s what Pam Parmelee, BSN, BA, MSHA, had in mind when she was hired to open and operate the Sharp Memorial Outpatient Pavilion in San Diego. The pavilion, owned by Sharp HealthCare, houses outpatient surgery, endoscopy, laser vision surgery, diabetes, imaging, radiation oncology, infusion, and community health services. The outpatient surgery center has 10 ORs and 2 pain procedure rooms.

When the doors opened 2 years ago, Parmalee said to herself, “I’m going to do this right. Our focus is going to be patient and physician satisfaction.”

The hotel industry inspired her to create a 5-star experience for patients. She charged each department to create an atmosphere where patients and physicians feel special and important.

“I told managers to think outside the box,” she says. “They could do anything they wanted to make their area stand out.”

Silver-platter service

The team in the endoscopy area hit the ground running. In fact, the department was the first in the pavilion to achieve 99% Press Ganey patient satisfaction scores just 4 months after it opened, and it has maintained those scores. Thirteen full-time RNs and 2 administrative assistants manage 300 cases a month.

“Patients don’t usually think favorably of endoscopy,” says manager Midolie Loyola, RN, BSN, CGRN. “They’re anxious, and not feeling so hot because of the at-home prep for the procedure. We wanted to provide an environment where we give excellent service and patients are comfortable.”

Loyola and her staff brainstormed to create a patient experience with these features:

• Patients are treated as honored guests. A welcome sign and administrative assistant greet them. When it’s their turn to go to the procedure room, rather than calling their names, the nurse enters the reception area, shakes their hand, and escorts them back.

• Each staff member who has contact with a patient signs a thank you card, which is attached to the patient’s chart, and addresses the envelope by hand. This is a requirement throughout the pavilion, Parmelee says.

• Framed art and CD stereo systems are in each procedure room, and patients choose their music.

• Nurses offer patients warm blankets and gowns, and booties await them on the bed.

• Framed art, silk floral arrangements, and a vanity stand adorn the bathrooms. Loyola adds amenities, such as flushable premoistened personal wipes, a basket with feminine pads, and potpourri and air freshener.

• Children receive teddy bears and other small toys.

• After the procedure, nurses serve crackers and juice, if allowed, in plastic stemware on a silver tray.

• Loyola places her business card with her pager number at the front desk so patients can call with questions or concerns following the procedure.

• Nurses call patients the day after the procedure to ask how they are feeling.
**Hire enthusiasm**

When interviewing, Parmelee and Loyola say they look for candidates who are supportive of the outpatient center’s philosophies and priorities of 5-star care.

“We look for smiling faces, enthusiasm, and energy,” Parmelee says. “We ask them to demonstrate how they would handle an angry patient or physician.”

Because she has hired the right people, Loyola says taking customer service to a superior level has not been difficult.

“At first, the nurses were a little hesitant to shake a patient’s hand, only because it was a different approach, but now they love it,” Loyola says.

She adds that the 5-star philosophy doesn’t get stale, and the endoscopy department’s consistently high patient satisfaction scores energize staff.

There has been some criticism from outside, she acknowledges. “It’s from managers in the hospital who haven’t bought into the service initiative and say we’re just doing this for the scores. I say, ‘Wouldn’t you rather work in an environment that you’re proud of and happy to be in?’”

**Little things mean a lot**

The outpatient pavilion is a new building with abundant light, plants, and artwork. Though it’s beautiful, Parmelee stresses that you don’t need a new building to provide 5-star service.

“It’s the little things you do for patients that matter,” she says. “It doesn’t have to take a lot of time or money.”

For example, a paid concierge greets visitors to the building. A Sharp volunteer then escorts them to their department if it is their first visit. All front-end employees wear the same blue jacket emblazoned with the Sharp logo.

If employees are not meeting 5-star expectations, Parmelee says they are immediately counseled. For example, Press Ganey scores were not as high as Parmelee wanted for registration staff in some departments. So she took them on a field trip. In one afternoon, they hit 5 ritzy hotels in the San Diego area and observed the behavior of the front desk staff. Each Sharp employee had to fill out a questionnaire describing language hotel employees used to greet customers, their facial expressions, and if they said the same things to every customer, Parmelee says.

Back at Sharp, she videotaped the registration employees in role-playing exercises so they could see if they smiled and how they looked while talking to patients. “It was very effective,” she says.

“Treating patients this way is mandatory,” Parmelee says. “We set our expectations high and hold people accountable. Physicians feel this place is different, and patients give incredible feedback.”

Indeed, volume in the outpatient surgery center increased 225% in the first 15 months of operation. More than 900 procedures take place a month, compared to 335 in the first months, Parmelee says.

Patient satisfaction scores measured by Press Ganey show the laser vision center at 99%, and outpatient surgery is between 91% and 94%. Turnaround time for ambulatory surgery cases averages 13 minutes, comparable to a freestanding for-profit facility, Parmelee reports.
A 5-star work environment

The staff is expected to uphold standards that become a 5-star experience at Sharp Memorial Outpatient Pavilion in San Diego:

• Give their best to those around them.
• Maintain a positive attitude.
• Maintain a calm, professional environment.
• Take pride in their work and have fun.
• Maintain a clean environment, keeping walls free of memos, notices, or flyers and not having food or drink in work areas.

Endoscopy manager Midolie Loyola, RN, BSN, CGRN, says employees also are treated like customers. Before a new employee’s first day on the job, she calls and sends a welcome letter. The employee’s preceptor also sends a welcome card. On the first day, the employee meets with Loyola for the first half hour and receives a care package from co-workers with lunch coupons, notebooks, and snacks.

“It’s just as important that employees feel welcomed and are acknowledged in a positive manner,” Loyola says. “What they do makes a difference, and we appreciate them from the start.”

As a result, she reports a turnover rate of 0.2% and employee satisfaction survey numbers averaging 4.85 out of 5. “If employees leave, it’s because they’re moving,” Loyola says. “We have nurses waiting to work here.”

And not just because of the free massages. As a thank you for meeting 5-star expectations, employees in the pavilion can get 15-minute head and neck massages, with a limit of 2 per week.