



STANDARDS INFORMATION BULLETIN

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CUSTOMER SERVICE AS PART OF LABORATORY QUALITY IMPROVEMENT FOR MEDICAL LABORATORIES

Philip Crosby defined quality practice as meeting the requirements of the customer. He applied this practice to business and manufacturing, but quality practices are also equally important for medical laboratories.

As a result, world over there have been numerous initiatives in health care to build customer service into organizations that provide health services including medical laboratories. For these organizations, exceptional customer service positively differentiates them from others. Therefore, incorporating good customer service at all levels in an organization is necessary and beneficial but it is also difficult and requires a culture change that demonstrates an appreciation for standards and quality.

This article will focus on customer service in the medical laboratory as a tool towards quality improvement. It will explain why quality customer service is important and describe some ways in which good customer service can be implemented.

WHY IS CUSTOMER SERVICE IMPORTANT?

The conduct of laboratory testing is similar in most laboratories due to regulations, equipment, and methodology. What differentiates exceptional laboratories is the good reputation they have built on the services they provide. In many instances, these services, which are highly customer focused, define the reputation of the laboratory.

Exceptional customer service is never an accident; it is always the result of high intention, sincere effort, intelligent direction and skillful execution. It is important to note that all laboratory staff must understand the importance of customer satisfaction before good customer service can be realized. Laboratory personnel must always interact with customers in a way that is appropriate, providing needed information, and being courteous.

WAYS OF IMPLEMENTING GOOD CUSTOMER SERVICE IN LABORATORIES INCLUDE:

- Providing physicians with accurate sample collection manuals and requisition forms that are complete and user friendly, with a timely delivery system.
- Providing patients with adequate information, both for preparation for sample collection, and information about the laboratory's services.
- Having trained and competent personnel who are courteous to all patients.
- Providing comfortable and private sample collection facilities.
- Providing assurance that the laboratory's records are maintained, retrieval and confidentially is present.
- Providing safe environment for customers.
- Adhering to regulations regarding the transport of samples and disposal of laboratory waste.

ASSESSING AND MONITORING CUSTOMER SATISFACTION

In order to understand whether the customer needs are being met. The laboratory needs to employ tools for gaining information. The laboratory needs to actively seek information from its customers, rather than just waiting for customers to contact the laboratory with a complaint.

Important information on customer satisfaction may be obtained by conducting customer surveys, monitoring the frequency and types of complaints and seeking feedback by conducting interviews or focus group meetings.

The information obtained should be evaluated and used to improve the laboratory's operations.

The quality management principles are:

- (1) Customer focus
- (2) Leadership
- (3) Engagement of People
- (4) Process Approach
- (5) Improvement
- (6) Evidence-based decision making
- (7) Relationship management.

Since laboratories rely on customers for business, it is imperative that the laboratory's management strive to ensure that their customers satisfied. This will encourage customer loyalty, increase their market base and the reputation of the laboratory.

Laboratories are encouraged to adopt the seven (7) Quality Management principles for improved performance.

The customer service at laboratories should evolve from a hopeful definition into a sophisticated attitude and culture. It will take no small amount of planning, measuring, trial and error, and implementation. But, the results will be tremendous. Remember, courteous treatment will make a customer a walking advertisement.

References

- 1) World Health Organization Laboratory Quality Management System Handbook 2011, WHO Press, Switzerland.
- 2) Victoria L. Anderson, Customer Service and Its Importance in the Clinical Laboratory April 2008 -Volume 39 Number

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