Comment Analysis Offers Insight into Patient Experience Trends During COVID-19

By Diana Mahoney

Patients' needs and expectations for health care delivery are shifting along with the progression of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the transition can be seen in an analysis of patients' comments about their care experiences. Previously, we reported about trends emerging from national and "hot zone" patient experience surveys received through early April. In particular, these data show an upward trend in top-box performance for most measures, with the exception of items related to patients' perceptions of environmental cleanliness and visitor treatment, both of which can likely be attributed to COVID-19–related concerns and policy changes. To gain deeper insight into some of these trends and identify opportunities for improvement, our new report focuses on patients' comments—specifically, those comments that mention *COVID-19* or *coronavirus*.

Press Ganey data scientists isolated approximately 35,000 COVID-19–related comments from the more than 7 million comments from patient experience surveys received between mid-February and April 4, 2020. Nearly 125,000 unique insights were generated from the comments using advanced artificial intelligence-based natural language processing technology.

> ### AT A GLANCE
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> - A new report shows an explosion in the number of comments mentioning *COVID-19* or *coronavirus* in patient experience data returned through early April 2020.
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> - Approximately 35,000 COVID-19–related comments from more than 7 million comments in patient experience surveys generated nearly 125,000 unique insights.
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> - The comment analysis indicates that patients appreciate and value the work that clinicians and other staff are doing to provide care during the COVID-19 crisis, but they have some concerns about environmental cleanliness and operational efficiencies.

Some important patterns emerged from the insights. In particular, in both negative and positive comments, patients' perceptions of their interactions with physicians and staff were associated with positive trends in loyalty and reputation measures.

Comments such as "I was there when COVID-19 had us all on high alert and they were all so professional and calming" suggest patients are aware and appreciative of the efforts to be comforting and communicative even while dealing with the stresses and unknowns of the COVID-19 crisis.

An early spike in negative comments related to tests and treatments (e.g., "CT scan never scheduled, perhaps because of coronavirus") began to reverse by the end of the month, possibly related to improved communication and expectation setting. Comments related to environmental cleanliness (e.g., "Given the presence of coronavirus, I was surprised at how tightly packed the seats are in your waiting area") and administration and logistics (e.g., "The technician got pulled away a few times by her colleagues asking coronavirus questions; I spent over 30 minutes in the lab just for blood tests and EKG") are still heightened but appear to be leveling off. These changes may reflect improvements in operational efficiency thanks to aggressive planning and response efforts.

In addition to the national analysis, the new report includes a comparative analysis of medical practice and emergency department patient experience performance in health systems from the early pandemic "hot zones" of Washington state, California, and New York to identify differences in patient experience performance between patients who do and do not mention *COVID-19* or *coronavirus* in their comments. Large gaps can be seen in items related to decision-making, such as the degree to which patients felt they were involved in care decisions, communication, and logistics related to call center and telehealth functionality. These findings suggest that patients who mention *COVID-19* or *coronavirus* might be feeling as if they are not getting the information they need when and how they need it.

Among the best-practice recommendations described in the report for improving performance on these and other items, the most important center on improving communication quality and transparency. "This is a critical moment and an important opportunity to build unbreakable bonds of trust with patients and families that will extend long past the pandemic," the report concludes.