



Time to Honour Those Who Serve

A colleague once told me with some chagrin that “The s**t always rolls downhill.” In our society, doctors are highly respected as figures of authority and knowledge. Patients exercise care to show the proper deference, esteem and courtesy towards our doctors. In the same vein, patients often accord the allied health professionals a similar level of regard and consideration. On the other hand, our support staff, namely the nurses, counter staff, clerks and other clinic / hospital assistants, are less fortunate. I have observed on a number of occasions how, when speaking to the support staff at our hospitals and clinics, patients who had appeared perfectly well-mannered, civil and gracious in front of the medical or paramedical professionals, metamorphosised dramatically into snarling, teeth-baring Hyde-like manifestations that contrasted sharply with the Dr Jekyll facade they displayed within the doctor’s room.

“Why can’t you squeeze in the appointment? I cannot wait so long you know! I’m going to complain against you!”

“Are you stupid? Why don’t you use your brains? Don’t you know my son has school on that day?”

“What the f**k is going on? I’ve been waiting here for 30 minutes already!”

Besides being at the receiving end of the patient’s ire, our support staff are often faced with criticism and rebuke from supervisors or administrators who simply cannot comprehend why they cannot be more efficient or service-friendly.

“Aiyoh, another complaint! How to win service award for the hospital now?” (When the nature of the complaint might be related to any one of the three scenarios represented above.)

Sometimes, we professionals ourselves, under pressure from our long patient lists and incredible workload, forget the stress our support staff are under and add to their difficulties with our own unending list of demands and unthinking censure when these demands are not met.

“How come I have five patients booked in within half an hour? How to work like that?” (When the appointment schedule was already full for the next three months and there was an expectation for patients to be seen within the month or less.)

“I want to take leave tomorrow. Please help me cancel all my appointments.” (Which left the support staff to deal with the wrath of patients who scold and curse them for making them take precious leave from work only to be told at the last minute that the appointment was cancelled.)

During this Christmas period, as we remember our family, loved ones and those less fortunate than us, let us not forget the unsung heroes of our respective hospitals and clinics, whose dedicated service, patient care and tireless efforts form the very pillars of our organisations. Our support staff have shed sweat and tears to keep us and our patients happy, and our organisations running smoothly, often with very little appreciation and much admonishment. Perhaps we can make their lives a little easier with just a bit more thought and consideration.

Here are some thoughts on what might help:

1. Speak to your support staff with courtesy. “Please” and “thank you” make the hardest demands that much easier to bear.
2. Give ample time for staff to meet requests. Last minute requests can raise blood pressure and cause unnecessary stress.
3. Make it clear to patients that we support our staff and expect them to be treated with the same courtesy and respect shown to us. It may help to put up posters or notices that say something like, “Our staff take pride in friendly service. Help them to serve you better by treating them with courtesy and consideration. Thank you.”
4. Give support staff the right not to be abused by making it okay for them not to have to respond to or acquiesce to the demands of patients who are aggressive, violent or use vulgar language on them.
5. If you know your support staff are fully stretched by their routine tasks, do what you can to help them out by doing some of your administrative work yourself. You may be under pressure, but so are they.
6. Find ways to show appreciation to your support staff. It is always nice to hear someone tell you they value your work and your efforts.
7. Listen to what your support staff have to say about their work. Do not be too quick to problem-solve or give suggestions until you have fully heard all their difficulties. A lot of things which seem easy to do when you are at the top are much harder to do when you are at the bottom of the organisational ladder.

And finally, some food for thought... “In battle, men die for the general they love and respect. The one they hate gets shot in the back.” ■

Merry Christmas!

Note:

All views and observations expressed in this article are those of the author’s alone and do not represent those of her fellow colleagues.



About the author:

The author is a psychologist working in a clinic setting. She has chosen to remain anonymous so as not to implicate her fellow colleagues and the organisation to which she belongs. She is personally guilty of many of the transgressions described above and is doing her best to let her inner light shine through.