Chapter XIV

HOSPITAL PUBLIC RELATIONS

1. Hospital Public Relations

The diagnostic and therapeutic infrastructure of the modern hospital attracts a large number of patients seeking relief from diseases and injury. The expectation of these people from a hospital often leave them dissatisfied and unhappy with the services that a hospital provides. This is, in spite of the fact that a hospital is provided with comparatively more sophisticated machinery as well as highly trained manpower\(^1\) which indicates that the gap between the hospital and its community is broad enough to act as an hinderance in the development of a mutual bond of relationship between the hospital and the people. Therefore public relations in hospitals has assumed great significance in today's hospital management.

In fact every institution has public relations of some kind and it may be friendly, cooperative, constructive or may be filled with tensions and suspicions.\(^2\)


J.K. Owen opined that there is a public relations aspect inherent in each activity of the hospital and in the administrative decisions behind it. Hospitals are faced with a mounting barrage of critical newspaper stories, magazine articles, television documentaries and radio programmes. As a result, the public is also taking a critical view of the hospital and its role in community. It is essential to define the term 'Public Relations' in order to understand the meaning, scope, functions, role of Public Relations in today's hospital administration.

Public Relations is a management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or an organisation with the public interest and execute a programme of action to earn public understanding and acceptance. 'Hospital Public Relations', therefore can be expressed as a deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding and relationship between the hospital and the community which utilises its services, with the objective of promoting goodwill between both the parties.


Role of Public Relations in Hospital

As it has been accepted that hospital as a social institution has to make a deliberate attempt to develop a mutual bond of relationship between itself and the society, good Public Relations establishes this mutual relationship which makes the existence of the hospital meaningful and its services properly utilized. However, Good Public Relations is no substitute for good performance or services. False image cannot be sustained for a long time but at the same time right policy and good performance do not get automatically appreciated or even known without effective Public Relations. Public Relations in a hospital is established by two elements of good services to patients and staff and free communication to the people. While organising public relation programmes, it should be kept in mind that the patient's needs are of paramount importance in the hospital. A patient has the right to have the best treatment a hospital is able to provide. He has also the right to be treated as quickly as possible whether admitted in the hospital or in outpatient department. He has the right to have adequate information about his condition and his progress and can expect that details of the treatment is given to him on his discharge so that the care can be continued by his local doctor. He has the right to be properly fed, supplied with drugs and surgical appliances to
enable him to be effectively treated for the illness or injury from which he is suffering. Any type of services being provided by a hospital may be perceived as good services by the hospital authority. There cannot be any specific rigid definition of good services to patient. However, it can be stressed that when all these above mentioned rights of a patient are fulfilled by a hospital, the public may acknowledge and accept the hospital services as good services. For meeting the patients' needs on the basis of their rights to the hospital, all the functional divisions providing some services or the other are involved. Good Public Relations would provide:

i) the recognition of the service and good performance of the hospital and of its staff by the people of the society;

ii) easy recruitment of staff and good staff relations is more easily obtained if the organisation enjoys a sound reputation and public confidence;

iii) in a hospital, an environment suitable for playing a more effective part within the community while contributing towards its general health and by preventive measures if it has the goodwill of other parties with whom it is brought into contact, thereby obtaining their cooperation and general support; and
a sound reputation which more readily inspires confidence and hope in those who seek its aid.

In attempting to implement a sound public relations programme, it must be appreciated that the process is based upon two way communication system. It is important for the hospital to know what the public is thinking or expecting and at the same time the public should know what the hospital can provide and what is that it wishes to communicate to the people. Each hospital has its own groups of public. Harold P. Kurt identified the public as different groups. These groups were mentioned as follows:

i) The patient public.
ii) The visitor and attendant public.
iii) The medical staff public.
iv) The other staff public.

It was also stressed that communication needed to be made effectively to all those public groups.6

Dr. S.L. Goel identified public for hospital as follows:7

i) The patient may be poor, middle class or rich.

iii) The Donors (in case of voluntary hospitals).
iv) The doctor nurses, para-medical, administrative and other staff.

Apparently it is quite clear from the changed trend in hospital utilization and its clientele that,
- everyone is interested in hospitals,
- everybody want to be informed about the hospitals, and
- public would like to hear about the hospital's services, facilities, advancement in various discipline of medical science etc. 8

This emphasises the need for effective communication between the hospital and its public. A few hospitals have appointed Public Relations Officers (PROs) to give them sound technical advice regarding hospital Public Relations programmes. This aspect of hospital administration of the Safdarjang Hospital was studied to examine the effort made to establish good Public Relations. The Public Relations Officer and other officers were interviewed for collecting relevant data and the job responsibilities of the PRO as laid down by the hospital were collected from the records maintained by the Chief Administrative Officer.

2. **Job Responsibilities of the Public Relations Officer**

The listed job responsibilities of the Public Relations Officer are as follows:

1. He will take a round of all the OPDs everyday to ensure that the areas are clean and public is comfortably seated. He will redress grievances, if any, on the spot. He will maintain a round register and submit it daily for perusal of medical superintendent.

2. He will look after the Department Canteen/Catering Services for staff.

3. Take care of the matters connected with the Union of staff.

4. Responsible for welfare of staff, their training education and other duties of a labour officer.

5. Has the responsibility of allocation and management of group 'D' staff.

6. Supervises social service department including correspondence in connection with welfare and treatment of patients.

7. The responsibility of management of Dharamsala.

8. He will look after welfare activities in residential estate.

9. Make arrangement for scooter/car/cycle stand contract parking facilities.
10. Health Education in the hospital including display of posters and film shows and preparation of hospital information booklet and other material for publication.

11. Call duty after office-hours.

12. Any other duty assigned by the MS/CAO from time to time.

The Public Relations Officer felt that these jobs are not suitable for her as she is appointed by the Ministry as a Labour Welfare Officer and she has no special training or education to perform these duties effectively. Some of following listed duties are performed by her as a welfare officer:

1. Deals with the matter connected with the Union of the staff.

2. Concerning staff canteen/public canteen.

3. Welfare of staff, their training, education and other duties of labour officer.

4. Supervise social service department including correspondence in connection with welfare and treatment of patients.

5. Redress grievances of the patients and relations report to her.

7. Only assists the CMO in charge of allocation and management of group 'D' staff.

8. Any other duty assigned by the MS/CAO from time to time.

Some of the other duties as listed below, are never performed:

1. He will take round of all the OPDs everyday to ensure that the areas are clean and public is comfortably seated. He will redress any grievances if any on the spot. This is usually taken care of by the OPD incharge. Sometimes the MS with management team takes this type of round to various units and issues orders for remedial actions.

2. Management of Dharmsala is not done by the PRO. It is managed by the manager appointed for the job.

3. Scooter/car/cycle stand contract parking facilities is also not done by the PRO.

4. Health education activities including display of posters and film shows are taken to care of by the respective department head and OPD incharge.

A Labour Officer is assigned the job of Public Relations in this hospital who works directly under the Medical Superintendent but for some purposes she reports to
the Chief Administrative Officer. Depending on the requirements in some hospitals a few more staff are assigned to PRO for assistance. In Safdarjang Hospital only a peon is assigned for the assistance to the PRO. An office for the PRO is set up near the central admission and enquiry office which is easily accessible to the public as well as to the staff.

3. Functions/Activities

Programmes for Public Relations are not only planned and formulated by the PRO but he is also responsible to see that these programmes are implemented. However, for programme implementation some of the hospital departments and staff are involved.

In some hospitals a public relations committee is made which supervises, evaluates and monitors the Public Relations programme. In Safdarjang Hospital no such committee has been formed. As the Labour Welfare Officer has been assigned the job of a PRO, she is not specially trained in Public Relations. She is responsible mainly for welfare of the staff, public relations, labour welfare and handling problems and counselling staff and public. No regular programmes are planned by the PRO for developing good Public Relations. However, some programmes are organised on regular basis by some departments, e.g., lamp lighting and prize
distribution function for the nursing students is organised by the Nursing Service Department. Sports club, recreation clubs once in a year organise some functions.

In regard to rights of the patients, in the hospital the PRO is not involved in making any deliberate planned programme for coordinating all the functional heads so that they plan their services to fulfil the rights of the patients.

The PRO is a member of few advisory committees in the hospital. As such, the position of the PRO is also a staff position and she is not involved in direct line of organisation even though she is given the responsibility of allocation and management of group 'D' staff. This violates the principles of staff position which is purely advisory and of counselling nature. The PRO is member of the following committees:

1. Hospital Leveries Committee.
2. Canteen Management Committee.
3. Purchase Committee for Sanitary material.

However, the employee welfare activities are not clearly spelled out in the hospital. These are very vague and scatteredly carried out by various departments. The PRO
does not have any scope to execute a planned programme towards in this regard. However, she is directly responsible for the management of staff canteen and deals with the matters related to staff union.

Many instances arose from the unhappiness of the staff towards the management published in leading newspapers, definitely acts as a black spot on the image of the hospital in public opinion. These issues with the Press and media like TV/Radio are dealt with by the DMS and not the PRO.

The next important activity of the public relations is 'communication to the people'. As it has already been discussed that Public Relations can only be established effectively being based on a two way communication process, the hospital should communicate adequate information regarding its budget, expenditure, total number of patients, inpatient services provided, outpatient services, laboratory and x-ray services, the staff situation, the problems being faced by the management for running day-to-day activities, future scope for development etc., so that the people who are consumer/clientele of the hospital services build their expectation based on these factual information rather than on their assumptions. When the expectation is rational chances of being dissatisfied are reduced to minimum. Keeping this in mind, the PRO makes a
4. Means For Communication

The means which are used for communicating with the public are:

4.1 Central Enquiry Service

There is a central enquiry centre in the hospital located near the admission office which handle the enquires of patients and relatives, provides them guidance in locating a ward/unit/department.

For guiding the illiterate people different colour strips on the wall for different wards and units are used.

However, it was observed that the patients and relatives who are generally poor and illiterate often feel lost when they come to the hospital. They are not provided the required information as most of the time it is not available with the receptionist.

4.2 Hospital Report

Which is an annual document published by a hospital for disseminating information on budget, staff, the quantity
and quality of patient care provided during the previous year to the public.

In Safdarjang Hospital at present no such formal report is being published. Only the annual statistical bulletin is prepared by the Medical Records Department.

However, the PRO is given responsibility of preparation of "Hospital Information Booklet" and other material for publication. The PRO also looks after the health education programme in the hospital including display of posters and organising film shows in the hospital.

4.3 Press Relations

Newspapers require information about patients either as individuals, patients, events or items of human interest occurring within the hospital or concerning hospital staff or about advancement in medicine, surgery or any other discipline. Information on these points may be conveyed to the Press by answering direct enquiries made by reporters, holding a press conference or by submitting a handout or press release.

The Deputy Medical Superintendent keeps and not the PRO in the hospital liaison with the leading newspaper agencies and meets all the enquiries made by any reporter.
4.4 Radio and Television

These mass media communication aids could be used for communicating with people. Programmes on hospital services should be promoted. Local groups should be informed, notices should be sent to the Press and people may be asked to send in their reactions. The PRO in this hospital is not given this assignment. It is taken care by the Deputy Medical Superintendent of the hospital.

4.5 Public Functions

Public functions like baby show, annual day celebrations, nursing school's lamp lighting ceremony, prize distribution function for the trainees etc. should be organised by the PRO in a hospital to which people of the community should be invited. Hospital and the public can come closer to each other through these functions. The people of the community start feeling that the hospital belongs to them. The PRO is not directly involved in organisation of such public function in this hospital. She gets herself associated with such functions when these are organised in the hospital.

4.6 Relations with the police

Harmonious relations between the police and the hospital are highly desirable. Many problems which arise
frequently can be solved by mutual understanding at the level of the Station House Officer. The hospital management staff, the medical, nursing paramedical and other staff are advised to maintain such relationship with the police. No special efforts on the part of the PRO in the hospital in this regard was noticed. However, the constables posted near casualty, have developed a friendly relationship with the staff working in the emergency department.

4.7 Relations with local health authorities

To provide comprehensive health care including preventive, curative, promotive and rehabilitative care is the mission of a hospital today. Close association between the hospital and the local government/authority is essential for taking care of the community particularly in case of outbreaks of infections, maternity patients, paediatric patients, care of old people, mentally abnormal patients, reporting of births and deaths, morbidity study, assistance in mortality rate of the area and general coordination in planning of overall health services, referral services etc. However, the PRO is made responsible only for the sanitation and cleanliness of the hospital. In this regard, she maintains liaison with the local authorities like NDMC.
4.8 Analysis of the complaints

All complaints received in the hospital should be thoroughly analysed and quick response to the complaints would go a long way in removing the irritants. Prompt action on complaints would reduce the number and variety of complaints from different areas of the hospital. The PRO in the hospital looks after this aspect in the hospital. There is arrangement in this hospital for redressal of public grievances. A Grievance Redressal Officer in the Ministry is specifically designated for each hospital who is available to public everyday. The PRO has been assigned this job within the hospital. Director-General of Health Services has been designated as the Chief Commissioner for Grievances and he is the Chairman of the Redressal of Grievances Committee. This Committee has been established to look into the complaints received directly in the Ministry regarding the Central Government Hospitals in Delhi. The complaints received directly in the Ministry are examined by an officer of the level of Deputy Secretary. Details from the concerned hospital are collected and thereafter these cases are discussed in the Redressal of Grievances Committee and remedial steps are taken accordingly.

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The Public Relations unit in the hospital is concerned with the complaints made personally at the hospital level and informs and advises the management on remedial steps. The complaints received by post are sent to vigilance section of the central diary unit. The section incharge of the vigilance section collects the comments from the person against whom the complaints are lodged. These complaints are then analysed and necessary actions are taken. The Deupty Medical Superintendent acts as vigilance officer in the hospital. About 5-6 complaints are received every month by post.

5. Conclusion

The following conclusions are drawn on the basis of the study of the Hospital Public Relations in the hospital, based on the analysis of the data gathered through informal interview of a number of patients and relatives, interview of the PRO and discussions with various officers in the hospital and the study of various records.

The commonly stated grievance against the hospital was a lack of communication between the hospital authorities and the public. The patients and relatives who are generally poor and illiterate often feel lost when they come to the hospital during their sickness. Although there is a Central Enquiry Centre, these patients and their relatives hardly
get any help from it. Only service centre at one place in such a large hospital complex is very much inadequate. Many times required information is not available with the receptionist and the direction given by her is so inadequate that these people have to go from place to place to seek proper information. This is more so during the evening shift of the day.

Even though a good communication system is adopted by the hospital for guiding the illiterate public by using different colour strips on the wall for different wards and units, most of these people do not follow them and nobody explains them about these colour lines on the wall. Particularly in the evening during the visiting hour very few hospital staff are around the campus to explain the purpose of this communication aid.

The person appointed as a Labour Welfare Officer is assigned the job of a Public Relation Officer. Public Relations is itself a speciality and this can only be effectively done by a suitable specially trained person. But the concerned officer is assigned all sorts of interim jobs which take up most of her time. As a result she is not free to organise or plan services for developing a sound public relations between the hospital and the community.
An organised Public Relations effort would go a long way in improving the hospital environment and minimising the complaints which are frequently made by the public using the hospital.