



TRAVEL NURSING

TravelNursing.com offers the latest on industry progress, technological advances and regulatory issues, all written by award-winning journalists.

Mystery Patients 'Shop' Health Care Facilities

By Christina Orlovsky, senior staff writer

For years, the retail and hospitality industries have put themselves under the microscope of a group of patrons whose job it is to inspect and evaluate their every move. They're called mystery shoppers and their goal is to help companies improve customer service. In the growing environment of patient-centered health care, hospitals and physician practices are taking the cue from customer service industries and enlisting the watchful eye of mystery patients.

Mystery patients are employed by companies like Devon Hill Associates, a La Jolla, California-based firm that works with large health care facilities across the country. Founder Barbara Gerber, a former hospital administrator who had created a business mystery shopping occupational health and assisted-living settings, conceived the idea of pursuing hospital clients during what she called a "dismal" hospital stay.

"I put on my consumer hat and decided I wanted to make the hospital experience better," Gerber explained. "I put the program together knowing that hospitals would never be the whole part of my business."

That was in 1996, and today, 10 years later, Gerber splits her mystery shopping between long-term care and hospital clients, who are becoming increasingly interested in customer service—an area in which, Gerber asserted, there's a great need.

“People in hospitals get caught up in the important, lifesaving things they have to do, and they sometimes forget about the service part,” she said. “Up until recently, there was really no need, but now that consumers are going to pay more and be able to compare pricing at different facilities, there will be an increase in demand for better customer service.”

Devon Hill Associates sends its mystery patients on a variety of assignments for its hospital clients, from the emergency department to outpatient surgery centers. Mystery patients pursue the experience all the way up until the actual surgery in order to evaluate service every step of the way.

“Most of the things they’re looking for have to do with communication: Is the provider telling them who they are and what their role is,” Gerber explained. “Patients are asking ‘Do you care about me and are you sensitive to my situation?’ I had someone go through the ER and comment that the triage nurse rolled through the list of questions without waiting for responses. That certainly has an impact on how a person feels the hospital cares about them.”

Gerber relayed that there has been some negative response from health care professionals who feel that people posing as patients take away from actual patients who need care.

“But then the hospital CEOs say that if they, as a hospital, can’t take care of three extra patients, then they really have a problem,” she added. “But they still don’t like someone looking over their shoulder.”

Still, Gerber’s mystery patients are trained to evaluate both bad and good in the hospital setting. “There are a lot of good things we find and report,” she said. “Then the nurses and other staff get extra recognition that they wouldn’t otherwise receive.”

While Devon Hill Associates focuses on large facilities, a Las Vegas-based company called Examine Your Practice sends its mystery patients to the private offices of fee-for-service providers, such as plastic surgeons, ophthalmologists and dentists. Jodi Manfredi, the company’s founder and president, created Examine Your Practice after years in dental sales.

“Being in the dental industry for so long, I saw the need for mom-and-pop practices to evaluate their customer service,” Manfredi said. “I had doctors telling me that patients were leaving their practice but they didn’t know why. That’s when the light bulb went on.”

Manfredi first saw her business model attracting specialized, non-insurance-based practices, which remain the bulk of her business, but she pointed out that she has been receiving inquiries from hospital-owned private practices that are insurance driven.

“Doctors want to start measuring patient satisfaction,” she explained. “They know that patients have more options and they want to go where they want to go, and they want to go somewhere that makes them feel good emotionally—not just physically—when they leave.”

Manfredi explained that the qualified mystery patients she hires go into physician’s offices for noninvasive procedures or consultations and evaluate everything from the first phone call to set up an appointment to the actual visit itself. Each physician client receives nine mystery visits each year, with six patients “shopping” within the first three months. An entire physician shop extends over the course of a year, after which the client is presented with a thorough review of all six shoppers’ evaluations. “Checkup shots” evaluate the practice’s progress based on the shoppers’ and the company’s recommended action steps.

“Plus, the shoppers and evaluations aren’t trained to just find what’s wrong,” Manfredi added. “They’re also trained to know what’s right. I’ve even had people accept plans from dentists or go in for whatever procedure they were shopping during the consultation. Thanks to the mystery patients, some doctors gain actual patients.”