Understanding how front-line staff use patient experience data for service improvement: an exploratory case study evaluation

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Disclaimer: This report contains transcripts of interviews conducted in the course of the research and contains language that may offend some readers.
Plain English summary

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Background and aim

The NHS collects a large number of data on patient experience, particularly through the national patient survey programme, but there are concerns that it does not use this information to improve care. This study explored whether or not, and how, front-line staff use patient experience data for improving quality of care.

Methods

We encouraged and observed quality improvement projects in six hospital medical wards, talked to staff involved and carried out a before-and-after survey of patient experience. We included sites across England with varied experience of patient-centred quality improvement so that we could explore how projects worked in different contexts.

Key findings

In every site, staff undertook quality improvement projects using a range of data sources. The number and scale of these varied, as did the extent to which they drew directly on patient experience data, and the degree of involvement from patients.

The ward-specific surveys conducted in each site were well received as timely and relevant. Patient stories, informal comments, and the daily ward experiences of staff, patients and family also fed into staff’s improvement plans. These less formal types of information are sometimes not recognised as patient experience ‘data’. They can be valuable for quality improvement, but it is not always obvious to front-line staff how to use them.

Staff may have good ideas but limited power to put them into practice. Progress was generally greater when there was support from a central patient experience/quality improvement function, and when the ward team comprised a range of professionals able to access help and resources. Staff motivation and engagement are essential but neglected; in some cases, staff used the project as a vehicle to gain greater recognition for their regular work. Some ward teams focused on improving staff experience as an indirect way to improve patient experience, describing this as ‘happier staff means happier patients’.

An online guide for NHS staff, based on our findings, was produced in collaboration with The Point of Care Foundation.
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