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MINISTRIA E SHENDETESISISE

POLICY BRIEF (#10)

ENGAGING COMMUNITIES IN THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A PATIENT-CENTERED APPROACH IN PUBLIC HOSPITALS

Health Reform Implementation Support Group (HRISG)

Meeting Held on January 17, 2014

INTRODUCTION

Communities across Albania will welcome a rapid improvement of public hospital services. This was evidenced by the results of a formative research of perceptions and attitudes of residents of Korca, Lezha, and Tirana toward public hospitals, conducted by EEHR in 2013. Making hospitals more responsive to consumers will require significant mobilization of hospitals' human resources including building capacities and implementing community engagement mechanisms. Making the system more responsive to the public is well worth the effort. If successful, it will amount to a market-driven transformation of public hospitals into customer-oriented institutions focused on serving better the health needs of the Albanian people.

Hospitals need to bring in their communities as partners with a voice in their affairs. Partnering with communities is essential to open up clogged communication channels, build the trust critical to making the hospitals more responsive to the consumer, and introduce democratic principles in hospital governance.



First meeting of the Community Advisory Council in LEzha Regional Hospital (photo credits/EEHR Project)

Key prerequisites for hospitals becoming more responsive to the needs of communities involve creating mechanisms and building hospital capabilities in a number of areas, including Creation of Partnership Mechanisms for Community Involvement (Community Advisory Council); Public Relations and Internal and External Communication; Customer Care; and Mechanisms for Collecting and Analyzing Customer Feedback. Together with the leadership and staff of three pilot hospitals – Korca and Lezha regional hospitals and Tirana Maternity Hospital #1, the USAID's EEHR project designed and implemented a series of targeted interventions that put in place some of most of the above main building blocks of a community/customer – oriented public hospital. Lessons learned from the implementation of these interventions suggest that rolling them out to other public hospitals need to be considered by the Ministry of Health.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN THE HEALTH REFORM PROCESS

Problem Statement: Communities and their civil society counterparts are central to a well-functioning health market and good health governance. Principles of accountability and responsiveness to community needs have become a stronger common thread in the modern health reform process. Community participation in hospital governance is weak at present. Strengthening it has a wide hidden potential to

harness critical public support for successful health system strengthening. Communities need to be engaged to express their preferences as consumers, provide input to institutional decision-making in health care, and offer their feedback on the performance of health care providers. This requires creating proper mechanisms for community involvement.

Results of Intervention Implementation: EEHR supported Lezha regional pilot hospital to build an effective mechanism for community involvement called Community Advisory Council (CAC). The establishment of CAC required preparing a concept, drafting Terms of Reference, selecting prominent community representatives to be invited as members of the CAC, meetings to solicit the participation of community representatives, providing orientation and technical direction and logistical and secretarial support to CAC meetings and discussions. The establishment of CAC has been viewed very positively by all of its members – community and hospital staff representatives. Both sides see the benefit offered by a transparent process where issues, problems, and solutions are openly discussed and the voice and concerns of communities is listened to by the hospital leadership and considered in the hospital decision-making process.

Recommended Policy Action: Regional hospitals should work with communities to establish CACs as an effective mechanism for engaging citizens in improved health sector governance and accountability and consumer-oriented decision making.

BUILDING HOSPITAL CAPABILITIES FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS AND COMMUNICATION

Problem Statement: Most public hospitals do not have capabilities for strong public relations and communication function. Such capabilities are essential for effectively engaging with communities and other hospital stakeholders. How well the hospital communicates externally is a function of how effectively its leadership, departments, and staff communicate internally. Internal hospital communication capacity is rather weak and so is the external one. The importance of the PR and Communication function is not well recognized and staff positions with required skills are missing.

Results of Intervention Implementation: EEHR worked within selected staff from the three pilot hospitals in Lezha, Korca and Tirana to build their capabilities for supporting the hospitals communication and PR needs. Trainings and on the job support was provided to help hospital staff learn from practice important technical aspects of good communication and PR. Hospital annual communication plans were developed and approved for implementation in 2014.

Recommended Policy Action: Recognize the function of PR and Communication as essential for hospitals to engage effectively with communities, public and private institutions, journalists, other hospital stakeholders. Open hospital positions for a PR and communications expert. Prepare and execute annual hospital communication plans that support the overarching strategic objectives of hospitals - to be more responsive to the needs of communities, to involve them as partners in decision making, and to be transparent and accountable to the Albanian people.

CREATING CUSTOMER CARE STANDARDS AND PRACTICES AT PUBLIC HOSPITALS

Problem Statement: Most public hospitals have been experiencing a steady reduction of customers over the years. This trend continues despite the fact that hospitals have maintained high staffing levels and received more and better equipment from the MOH. The outflow of customers has provided direct and effective community feedback to the hospitals which have been experiencing it. The reduced flow of customers has created long and short-term risks to the hospitals and its staff. It has increased the fixed hospital cost per patient which in a future performance-based hospital financing system could lead to downsizing personnel and lower budgets.

The reasons for customer outflow are not always related to the quality of clinical care. The formative research conducted by EEHR brings evidence that a the way how hospital staff treats its customers is a factor in their decisions whether to revisit the hospital or seek alternatives in the future. Treating customers well is also a prerequisite to engaging communities effectively. It shows respect that is critical first step in a trust-building process between hospitals and their communities.

Results of Intervention Implementation: With EEHR support, the three pilot hospitals started setting the base for a customer care system (standards and implementation approach), which if put in place properly, can start changing the negative societal opinions and perceptions about public hospitals. The ultimate goal behind instituting a customer care system is to reverse the downward trend of customer visits for reasons not related to issues of clinical care. With EEHR support 49 staff from the three pilot hospitals received

expert training in high quality customer care. Selected hospital staff was trained as trainers who will train other hospital staff in customer care. With EEHR support hospitals worked to create a set of hospital-specific customer care standards, implementation plans, and related performance monitoring and evaluation procedures.

Recommended Policy Action: Hospitals need to establish and maintain standards for customer care making the hospital environment more welcoming to the customer and inviting communities to return to the hospitals in expectation of better treatment.

PATIENT SATISFACTION SURVEY

Problem Statement: Customer satisfaction is a key determinant of quality of care, an important component of health institution metric, and one of the mechanisms supportive of good health sector governance. The patient satisfaction survey helps capture information about health institution performance that can help guide hospital improvement measures. The survey and its analysis of survey results also help the hospital better understand some of the critical outcomes of their interventions.

Results of Intervention Implementation: EEHR, worked with the staff of Maternity Hospital #1 in Tirana to revise an existing patient satisfaction survey in a format that is easier to understand and fill out which welcomed an increased response rate. The questionnaire is made available on paper and is accessible electronically via the hospital website and from mobile devices. Customer satisfaction surveys on specific topics were also prepared and launched at Lezha regional hospital and Tirana Maternity Hospital #1. Survey results are analyzed to support a better hospital decision making process.

Recommended Policy Action: Patient satisfaction survey should be introduced to hospitals as an important tool for customer feedback that can strengthen hospital governance and positively influence hospital decision making and performance.