

The public sector needs to solve two problems—delivering better health outcomes and getting patients to come in—and each calls for different solutions.

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To improve health outcomes, the government needs to improve the actual quality of care by focusing on the performance of the staff, the supply of medicines and the quality of infrastructure.

However, to improve patient footfall, they need to improve the perceived quality of care. The levers tend to be non-medical issues such as accessibility, waiting time, privacy, time with a doctor, administrative efficiency, and other services such as food and lodging for families.

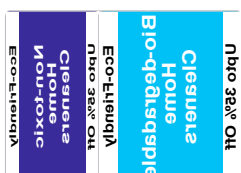
Perception matters

People perceive that quality is better at informal providers even though the latter often mishandle common ailments (for example, prescribing antibiotics instead of oral dehydration salts and zinc for diarrhoea in young children).

This quality perception is exaggerated by the fierce competition among private providers, which compels them to satisfy customers by focusing on the immediate relief of symptoms rather than the most effective treatment.

In the public sector, by contrast, the disrespect patients endure extends to verbal or even physical abuse. Private providers—unqualified or licensed—would not retain patients if they treated them that way.

Using customer feedback to fix it:



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Compared to the private sector, the government offers a lifetime of employment with little opportunity for reward or recognition. In other words, there is little incentive to behave better.

That is why we recommend that the government draws on a classic marketing technique: going straight to the consumer for feedback. They need to understand what rural and semi-urban patients value in health care; eventually, people must sense a real commitment to change.

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Here are some ways in which governments can seek patient feedback:

- **Pilot different methods:** We recommend piloting and empirically testing different approaches and methods, perhaps in partnership with private entities that have available platforms for providing feedback.
- **Make it accessible and unbiased:** A feedback mechanism allowing people to share stories should be cellphone-based and run by an independent organisation.
- **Keep metrics in mind:** Careful consideration is needed to develop a panel of metrics for patient satisfaction that balance the need for correct medical care with the cultural and personal expectations of patients (for example, the widespread assumption that every malady requires antibiotics).
- **Be committed:** Above all, consumer feedback must go hand in hand with a commitment to improving infrastructure, training, and skills.

It's not going to be easy

Creating a good feedback system for public health is a huge task, likely taking one to two years to establish. It requires a special cell at headquarters with a team of 10-20 people. There were some small feedback experiments in Uttar Pradesh with a helpline number posted in every hospital. But the project never took off as the helpline was handled by only two clerks, who didn't always answer the phone.

The feedback also has to matter, because if it is not acted upon, citizens will lose interest. It must be integrated into the human resources management system of the staff, including annual performance reviews, promotions and transfers.

Also Read: [Here's How Rural Indians Can Get the Same Opportunities as Their Urban Counterparts.](https://www.thebetterindia.com/119176/how-rural-indians-can-get-same-opportunities-as-urban-counterparts/) (<https://www.thebetterindia.com/119176/how-rural-indians-can-get-same-opportunities-as-urban-counterparts/>)

Some countries have already successfully implemented this kind of feedback loop on health. Practo.com allows urban patients in Brazil, India, Indonesia, Singapore and the Philippines to search private healthcare providers, read patient reviews of them, and add their own feedback. In the United Kingdom, iwantgreatcare.org provides similar search and feedback abilities for patients of the National Health Service. But there is no comparable platform in India today that reaches the three-quarters of Indians who live in rural areas.

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Feedback may be just one step, but it's an important one



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Introducing accountability into government healthcare will require a profound culture change. Respect for patients and a focus on results will not be easy to achieve. But if the government wants to build a strong public health system, it needs to start by listening to people like Anita.

About the authors:

Dr Sema Sgaier is Co-founder and Executive Director of Surgo Foundation, a privately-funded 'action tank' whose goal is to generate behavioural insights and translate them into tools for transformative and accountable development programmes.

Amod Kumar (IAS) is an Indian Administrative Service officer with 20+ years of administrative experience in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state. He has contributed significantly to the fields of e-governance, education, health and family welfare.

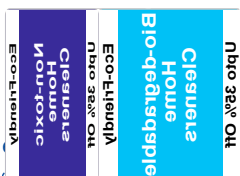
This article was originally published on the India Development Review [website](#) (<http://idronline.org/how-patient-feedback-can-transform-indias-public-health-system/>).

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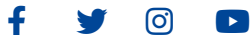
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