

Hospitality, not medical care, drives patient satisfaction

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Patients' ratings of hospitals and willingness to recommend them have almost no correlation to the quality of medical care provided or to patient survival rates, according to new Cornell University research.

Would you choose a hospital based on its Yelp reviews? Relying on hospitals' patient satisfaction scores as a guide amounts to much the same thing, according to the new study.

The scores—collected in surveys by hospitals and a top priority in the era of consumer-driven [health care](#)—overwhelmingly reflect patients' satisfaction with hotel-like amenities and hospitality services such as quiet rooms, [better food](#) and friendly nurses, said Cristobal Young, associate professor of sociology in the College of Arts and Sciences at Cornell University.

"The No. 1 thing that ultimately matters to patients—are you going to survive your operation? Can they fix you? - does not really factor into patient satisfaction scores," said Young. "There's very little awareness that these are essentially Yelp reviews."

Young is the lead author of "Patients as Consumers in the Market for Medicine: The Halo Effect of Hospitality," co-written with Xinxiang Chen of Minzu University in China and published in the journal *Social Forces*.

Young and Chen analyzed Centers for Medicaid and Medicare Services data on patient satisfaction, mortality and technical medical quality for roughly two-thirds of U.S. general and acute-care hospitals—more than 3,000 hospitals—between 2007 and 2010.

They found patient satisfaction was higher at hospitals with the lowest death rates—but barely. Scores were only 2 percentage points lower at hospitals with the highest death rates.

"Patients do not have much awareness of their hospital's patient safety standards," the researchers wrote.

In contrast, interpersonal communication by nurses—such as their responsiveness and compassion (not their technical skill) - was a far bigger factor in patient satisfaction, with scores varying by nearly 27 percentage points.

The tidiness and quietness of rooms also had much bigger impacts on satisfaction than death rates or medical quality.

The fundamental problem, Young said, is one of visibility. Patients generally can only see and understand a hospital's "front stage" room-and-board presentation.

"They know when the food is cold and tasteless, when their room is loud and overcrowded, when the nurses are too busy to tend to their pains and frustrations," the researchers wrote.

They have little insight, however, into the "backstage" operations where critical medical care happens—sometimes while patients are heavily medicated or completely sedated. As a result, the study concludes, front stage room-and-board care creates a "halo effect" of patient goodwill, but the backstage delivery of medical excellence does not.

At the same time, research has shown, many hospitals, particularly in competitive markets, have invested heavily in hotel-like amenities: Grand atriums with waterfalls; private rooms with patios and scenic views; "healing gardens"; artwork; music; gourmet food; Wi-Fi; and premium TV channels.

Those investments, Young said, represent a distraction and a shifting of resources away from hospitals' core mission: excellent medical care.

"No one would object to nurses being friendly or to [patients](#) having [private rooms](#) and great food and manicured gardens," Young said. "But

none of those things are medical treatment. They won't fix your health problem. And hospitals have limited resources and razor-thin margins."

Hospitals' growing emphasis on patient [satisfaction](#) is unexpected, Young said, in a U.S. health care system that is roughly twice as expensive as other high-income countries but has worse outcomes—lower life expectancy and higher rates of illness, according to the study.

"If I'm a patient, I know that three days in the [hospital](#) will be rough," he said. "Just make it worthwhile—give me the best medical treatment and the highest survival rate."

More information: Patients as Consumers in the Market for Medicine: The Halo Effect of Hospitality, *Social Forces*, [DOI: 10.1093/sf/soaa007](#) , [academic.oup.com/sf/advance-ar.../sf/soaa007/5735232](#)

Provided by Cornell University

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