

## *The Patient Experience Post*

Healthcare's Resource for  
Service Excellence  
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Since the mid-1990s, Baird has helped healthcare organizations nationwide improve the patient experience and enhance organizational culture. Baird's culture assessment and diagnosis include experience mapping, medical mystery shopping, and focus groups to reveal the real customer experiences within your organization. Using your patients' experiences, Baird and her team prescribe critical next steps for improving patient satisfaction and HCAHPS scores.

## **Bypassing the Heart can Kill the Patient Experience**

by Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA

### **Nurses Don't "Speak HCAHPS"—and They Shouldn't be Expected To!**

When I say "HCAHPS" to nurses, what words or phrases come to mind? "Great patient experience?" "Exceptional care?" "Quality improvement?" Not even close.

Instead, the words that most readily come to mind are words like: "Survey." "Score." Or even "Punishment."

I've literally spoken to thousands of nurses over the past couple of years. As I give presentations or consult with groups around the country, I will often bring up the subject of HCAHPS. When I do this in a group of nurses you can almost feel a change in the room. Eyes roll. Smiles disappear. Arms fold. They can look visibly tired, or beaten down.

### **The Pain of HCAHPS**

As I talk with nurses about these responses, I find that many of them feel punished by leaders for low scores. This isn't the intention of hospital administrators. But, when reimbursement and reputations are on the line, these feelings can be an unintended consequence of being under the spotlight. As HCAHPS become more important, leaders are bound to give the scores, and the source of the scores, more attention. There's a responsibility to fix or to improve troubled areas and that means focusing on what happens during the patient encounters, specifically on nursing units. After all, it's inpatients that receive the survey. The nurses' response is not necessarily that leaders are focusing more, it's HOW they are focusing on HCAHPS. In many cases it's by handing down edicts and trying to enforce tactics.

Here's what we recommend: forget the score! That's right. Forget about making the survey score the focus of all of your activity around patient care and the patient experience. The survey is not the focus. The patient is the focus. Nurses know that.

One of the things I most enjoy about our Nurse/Patient Partnership course is that we start the program with stories. I ask the audience to think about a time when a nurse made a lasting impression on them—either positive or negative. I get them thinking about their own life stories. Then I remind them that *they*, as nurses, are part of their own patients' life stories. And then I ask them to spend some time contemplating what they would like those stories to be.

### **Relieving the Pain**

When we forget about the HCAHPS we can get back to a focus on what's most important to nurses—and to the hospitals and patients they serve. Forget the survey – forget the score. Let's go back to the basics of bringing out the empathy in nursing and why we love it; we love nursing because we love giving care to patients. That's where the focus should be; the focus should be on the patient. Not to increase scores, but to

improve service and quality of care. The scores will follow.

Last year, Press Ganey [released a report](#) as part of its Insights series indicating that nurse communication was what they called a “rising tide measure.” Based on an analysis of more than 3,000 U.S. acute care hospitals using publicly available data, the study suggests that when hospitals improve nurse communications with patients, they will see a boost in other areas as well: responsiveness of hospital staff, pain management, communication about medication, and increased overall patient experience scores, for instance.

As Christina Dempsey, Press Ganey’s Chief Nursing Officer said in the report, “As the bedside caregivers, nurses have the most interaction with patients and are positioned to have the greatest impact on their overall experiences.” Those experiences, of course, will have an impact on HCAHPS scores.

### **Let Qualitative Drive Quantitative**

It’s not that we’re really going to ignore HCAHPS – clearly we can’t do that. What we can do, though, is to learn to connect with nurses from the heart first. The head (intellectual comprehension about the scores) and hands (the skills) will follow.

What can your hospital do? It can start by backing off on the singular focus on HCAHPS scores and helping nurses connect the heart. Speak *their* language—a language of empathy and caring, a language focused on the qualitative, not the quantitative.

*That’s* the way you boost your HCAHPS scores.

Want to learn more? Ask us about the [Nurse/Patient Partnership](#).

*Phone communication is an essential part of the patient experience and is often the first part of the patient experience. In just seconds, your patients are deciding if you are friendly, knowledgeable, concerned, and willing to help. In fact, research shows that after just a 2-minute phone encounter, patients are clear about whether or not they would return to your organization or recommend it. Patients rely on phone encounters to make appointments and seek clinical advice. Other callers rely on phone encounters to gain vital information about a loved one. In both situations, it’s important that you create a positive, trust-building experience. To engage your staff in essential phone skills, look toward the tips and tools in [You’ll Have Them at “Hello”: Phone skills that will WOW your callers every time](#). For only \$199, you’ll receive the following: the video recording, presentation slides, a transcript of the recording, a participant guidebook, a moderator guidebook, a quality assurance tool, and additional handouts! This session is also available as a live training workshop.*

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*Nurse, author, and consultant Kristin Baird, "Healthcare’s Customer Service Guru," is the author of *Raising the Bar on Service Excellence: The Health Care Leader’s Guide to Putting Passion into Practice* (Golden Lamp Press, 2008), *Reclaiming the Passion: Stories that Celebrate the Essence of Nursing* (Golden Lamp Press, 2004), and *Customer Service In Healthcare: A Grassroots Approach to Creating a Culture of Service Excellence* (Jossey Bass, 2000). The Baird Group provides consulting, mystery*



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