



Effectiveness of the Customer Care Desk in Enhancing Patient Satisfaction at Muhimbili National Hospital - Mloganzila, Tanzania.

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ABSTRACT

The study assessed the effectiveness of the Customer Care Desk in enhancing customer satisfaction at Muhimbili National Hospital -Mloganzila. Using a mixed-methods approach, 278 patients were randomly selected to complete questionnaires, while interviews were purposively conducted with 11 customer care personnel. The findings revealed that over 80.6% of patients preferred face-to-face engagement, and that staff used language that was generally clear, reliable, and appropriate. Information was provided in a timely manner, and most issues raised were professionally addressed and followed up. However, some cases experienced delays or lacked feedback entirely. The study identified opportunities to improve service delivery through the adoption of digital technologies, recruitment of additional staff, and expansion of feedback channels to enhance accessibility and responsiveness.

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INTRODUCTION

Patient satisfaction has become a central concern in healthcare management, as it directly influences trust, loyalty, and the overall perception of service quality (Alibrandi, Gitto, Limosani, & Mustica, 2023; Alrubaiee & Alkaa'ida, 2011). Ensuring positive patient experiences is essential not only for enhancing hospital reputation but also for fostering long-term relationships between patients and healthcare providers (Surydana, 2017; Ferreira et al., 2023).

In response to this need, public hospitals have increasingly established customer care desks to improve communication between patients and healthcare providers. These desks serve as dedicated units for handling complaints, responding to inquiries, and gathering feedback, with the aim of enhancing service quality and patient satisfaction (Cook, 2010; Fatonah & Palupi, 2020). Effective customer care has been shown to reduce misunderstandings, resolve conflicts, strengthen cooperation, and shorten response times, all of which contribute to better patient-centered care (Kimilu, Mwenja, & Mbugua, 2023; Yawson et al., 2013; Ong, Haes, Hoos, & Lammes, 1995).

At Muhimbili National Hospital -Mloganzila, a customer care desk was established to facilitate communication and provide timely solutions to patient concerns. Despite these efforts, persistent complaints and dissatisfaction among patients indicate that the desk's effectiveness in achieving its objectives requires further assessment (Khateeb & Mahmood, 2019; M. G., Arora, & Sharma, 2022). Understanding the extent to which such units improve patient experiences is therefore critical for guiding hospital management practices.

In today's healthcare environment, attracting new patients is increasingly challenging, making retention through quality service even more important. Customer care services are central to this effort, as they support relationship building, enhance service delivery, and promote patient satisfaction and loyalty (Felicite et al., 2023; Andeleeb, 2001; Willie, 2024). By effectively addressing patient concerns and improving the overall service experience, customer care desks play a key role in achieving patient-centered care and ensuring high-quality hospital services.

Statement of the problem

Despite significant advancements in healthcare delivery, public perception of service quality in many government hospitals remains a concern. Patients often report dissatisfaction with aspects such as long waiting times, limited communication about service availability, delayed responses to complaints, and challenges in navigating complex hospital systems. These issues can undermine trust in public healthcare institutions and negatively affect overall patient satisfaction.

To address these challenges, the government of Tanzania has established customer care desks in public health facilities, including Muhimbili National Hospital – Mloganzila. These desks are intended to serve as dedicated points of contact where patients can lodge complaints, seek information, provide feedback, and receive timely assistance. In theory, they are designed to enhance communication, improve service delivery, and foster a patient-centered approach to care.

However, despite their strategic importance, there is limited empirical evidence regarding the actual effectiveness of these customer care desks in enhancing patient satisfaction. While anecdotal reports suggest improvements in complaint handling and communication, systematic assessments remain scarce. It is unclear whether the desks are fully achieving their objectives, such as reducing patient frustrations, facilitating quicker service responses, and improving overall patient experiences.

This gap in knowledge presents a critical opportunity for hospital management and policymakers to evaluate the performance of customer care desks, identify operational challenges, and implement evidence-based strategies to improve service quality. Therefore, this study seeks to assess the effectiveness of the customer care desk at Muhimbili National Hospital – Mloganzila in enhancing customer satisfaction, providing insights that could guide improvements in public hospital service delivery across Tanzania.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Customer care, as a critical component of public relations, functions as a frontline interface between organizations and their clients, providing direct channels for communication, feedback, and problem resolution (Felicite et al., 2023). In the healthcare sector, effective customer care is particularly crucial because it directly influences patient experiences, satisfaction, and the overall perception of service quality. Hospitals are expected to deliver services that meet defined standards of quality healthcare, encompassing not only clinical care but also elements such as customer satisfaction, availability of medications, pharmaceutical services, brand image, and perceived customer value (Surydana, 2017). These standards highlight the multifaceted nature of healthcare delivery, where administrative efficiency, interpersonal interactions, and operational responsiveness are as important as medical outcomes.

A key aspect of customer care in healthcare is communication. Effective communication between service providers and patients ensures clarity, transparency, and trust, contributing to higher service quality and patient satisfaction (Willie, 2024; Hijazi et al., 2018). Proper communication tools in medical practice are essential for multiple functions, including conveying accurate medical information, managing billing, scheduling appointments, maintaining ongoing

connections with patients, and gathering timely feedback (Pandirkar, 2021). Without effective communication channels, patients may experience confusion, delays, and dissatisfaction, which can negatively impact their overall perception of the hospital's performance.

Healthcare providers aim to achieve customer satisfaction by consistently delivering high-quality services to patients, their relatives, and other stakeholders (Umoke et al., 2020). Customer care is therefore a central determinant of satisfaction, shaping the trust and relationship between service providers and patients (Andeleeb, 2001; Ong, Haes, Hoos, & Lammes, 1995). Studies have shown that patients' satisfaction often depends not only on clinical outcomes but also on the quality of interpersonal interactions, including responsiveness, empathy, and attentiveness. Effective communication, in particular, strengthens the bond between patients and providers, influencing decisions on whether to continue using a particular healthcare facility (Alrubaiee & Alkaa'ida, 2011).

Research consistently demonstrates that customer care and patient satisfaction are inseparable. Patients are likely to share experiences regarding service quality, highlighting whether their expectations were met or unmet (Mittal & Lassar, 1996). Service quality dimensions such as responsiveness, reliability, and empathy significantly enhance satisfaction, with customer care desks playing a critical role by directly engaging patients, resolving complaints, and providing real-time assistance (Gok & Sezen, 2013; Ferreira, Vieira, Pedro, Caldas, & Varela, 2023). By understanding patients' needs, desires, and expectations, healthcare providers can tailor services to align with these requirements, thereby improving patient satisfaction and loyalty (Pandirkar, 2021).

Empirical evidence from other African contexts supports the positive impact of customer care desks on healthcare delivery. For example, in Ghana, hospitals with well-structured customer care desks and trained personnel reported a 51.9% reduction in complaints related to service delays and staff unresponsiveness (Yawson et al., 2013). Similarly, customer care personnel equipped with strong communication skills have been shown to minimize misinterpretations of medical information, reduce conflicts, and de-escalate complaints effectively (Altshuler et al., 2023). These findings underscore the value of customer care desks not only as administrative support units but also as strategic mechanisms to enhance patient experiences, improve service quality, and foster trust between healthcare providers and the communities they serve.

In summary, literature highlights that customer care desks are integral to healthcare management. They serve as bridges between hospitals and patients, ensuring efficient communication, reducing conflicts, and improving patient satisfaction. The effective implementation of these desks depends on well-trained personnel, appropriate communication tools, and a clear understanding of patients' expectations and needs. By fulfilling these roles, customer care desks can

significantly enhance service delivery, strengthen hospital reputations, and contribute to better health outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a case study design, using Muhimbili National Hospital to represent other government hospitals, and employed a mixed-methods approach involving questionnaire and interview data collection methods. Structured questionnaires were distributed to customers, customers' relatives, and other stakeholders. Interviews were conducted with customer care personnel in order to get first-hand data. The study employed random and purposive sampling procedures whereby 11 customer care purposively contacted, and 278 respondents were randomly distributed questionnaires. The study used customers and relatives as the unit of analysis because the study aims to assess how they are satisfied with the services offered by the hospital.

RESULTS

The purpose of this study is to assess the effectiveness of the Customer Care Desk in enhancing customer Satisfaction with a focus on Muhimbili National Hospital -Mloganzila, which is a government-owned tertiary hospital. The findings are summarised below;

The Methods Customers Use to Communicate with the Customer Care Desk

The findings shows that the frequency of methods customers used to engage with customers as follows 80.6% (224 respondents) communicate with the customer care desk through face-to-face interaction, followed by telephone communication 5.8% (16 respondents), while other methods, such as suggestion boxes 3.6% (10 respondents), hospital website or social media 2.5% (7 respondents), and notice boards 0.4% (1 respondent) are rarely used. The findings indicate strong reliance on physical visits, suggesting limited adoption of digital platforms and other indirect communication methods. The implication is that MNH-Mloganzila should enhance alternative communication channels, particularly digital platforms, to improve accessibility and reduce congestion at the customer care desk, ultimately enhancing service efficiency and customer satisfaction.

The Customer Care Desk Staff Use Clear and Fluent Language to Communicate with Customers

Effective communication is essential for ensuring understanding and building trust between service providers and clients, which is crucial for customer satisfaction.

Based on the findings, most of the respondents agreed that the customer care desk staff use clear and fluent language when communicating with customers. The findings suggest that the language used is generally appropriate and effective in facilitating understanding between staff and clients. The findings imply that MNH-Mloganzila has a strong communication foundation, but further improvements in language customization and responsiveness could enhance customer satisfaction even more.

The customer care desk facilitates the provision of reliable and timely information

Timely and reliable information is crucial for enhancing customer trust, improving service accessibility, and supporting informed decision-making by customers and their families.

Based on the findings, most of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that information provided through the customer care desk is accurate and timely. The findings may be interpreted as an indication that MNH-Mloganzila has established effective communication processes that ensure customers receive essential information promptly. The implication of this result is significant for healthcare service delivery because timely and accurate information builds trust, enhances customer confidence, and contributes to overall satisfaction, thereby reinforcing the effectiveness of the customer care desk in achieving its objectives.

The communication methods used by the customer care desk make it easier for customers to access services.

Most of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the existing communication methods at MNH-Mloganzila facilitate access to services. The interpretation of the findings suggests that the current communication strategies are effective in enabling customers to reach necessary services easily. However, this implies that while this is a positive outcome, there remains an opportunity to enhance accessibility further by integrating more digital communication options such as online chat systems, social media responsiveness, and mobile platforms to accommodate customers who prefer remote or real-time engagement.

Face-to-Face Interaction as the Primary Engagement Method

This theme highlights that face-to-face interaction remains the most dominant strategy used by the MNH-Mloganzila customer care desk to engage with customers. Customer care personnel emphasized that customers strongly prefer physical visits because they believe guarantees quick assistance and personal attention.

Although this approach builds confidence, it causes congestion and delays. The implication is that

MNH-Mloganzila should complement this method with digital alternatives such as WhatsApp consultations, live chat systems, and call-back services to improve efficiency and reduce overcrowding.

This finding highlights a cultural perception that personal contact guarantees service quality. The implication is that MNH-Mloganzila should maintain face-to-face support for urgent needs but also create awareness campaigns to educate customers about the reliability and convenience of digital and phone-based options.

Emphasis on Professional and Clear Communication

Findings reveal that professionalism and the use of clear language are key strategies employed by the MNH-Mloganzila customer care desk to enhance customer engagement. Respondents stressed that respectful communication and simplicity of language are essential for building trust and ensuring customers understand the information provided.

The findings added that language clarity and respectful interaction are considered priorities by the staff. The implication is that continuing to uphold these standards will sustain customer trust, but introducing multilingual support and visual communication aids could make the service more inclusive for customers with language barriers.

The findings reflect that staff view professional communication as more than giving information; it is also about emotional support and reassurance. The implication is that MNH-Mloganzila should strengthen staff training in customer empathy and customer-centered communication to maintain high satisfaction levels. Similarly, another respondent commented

Staff use clear, polite communication as a tool for conflict management and to maintain a positive hospital environment. The findings imply that MNH-Mloganzila should continue investing in interpersonal skills training and stress management techniques for customer care staff to ensure consistent quality service.

Strong Commitment to Timely and Accurate Information

This theme highlights the emphasis that MNH-Mloganzila customer care desk places on providing reliable, prompt information to customers. Respondents indicated that timely and accurate responses are critical for reducing confusion and improving the hospital experience. This indicates that immediate and accurate responses build customer confidence and improve service flow. The implication is that MNH-Mloganzila should continue this practice while introducing digital solutions such as real-time service updates on screens or mobile platforms to enhance convenience.

Based on the findings, staff make deliberate efforts to verify details, which helps prevent misinformation. The implication is that MNH-Mloganzila should implement integrated hospital information systems so that customer

care staff can access real-time data without having to rely heavily on phone confirmations.

The findings reveal the critical role of prompt communication in reducing customers anxiety and maintaining order in a busy hospital environment. The findings also suggest that MNH-Mloganzila should continue prioritizing this strategy while exploring technological tools such as digital helpdesks and automated response systems to maintain speed and accuracy even during peak hours.

Limited Use of Digital Platforms Despite Their Importance

The study highlights that while MNH-Mloganzila has introduced alternative communication channels like telephone lines and social media, their utilization by customers remains very low. Respondents explained that customers prefer physical interaction due to trust issues instead of digital platforms, even though these tools could reduce congestion and waiting time.

The findings indicate that there is a lack of trust and awareness regarding alternative communication channels. The implication is that MNH-Mloganzila should conduct awareness campaigns and educate customers about the benefits and reliability of these digital platforms to encourage adoption and reduce unnecessary physical visits.

Respondents reveal that technical inefficiencies, such as long waiting times on calls, discourage customers from using remote services. The implication is that MNH-Mloganzila should invest in improving telephone infrastructure by adding more lines, deploying call management systems, and training staff to respond quickly to build customers confidence in non-physical communication channels.

The finding reflects a strong cultural preference for in-person engagement and skepticism toward digital platforms in healthcare settings. The implication is that MNH-Mloganzila needs to create a structured digital communication system with guaranteed response times and feedback tracking to improve trust and increase usage of online platforms for non-emergency inquiries.

DISCUSSION

The study established that MNH-Mloganzila primarily relies on face-to-face interaction (80.6%) as the dominant communication strategy, with limited use of alternative channels such as telephone (5.8%), suggestion boxes (3.6%), and digital platforms like social media or the hospital website (2.5%). This heavy dependence on physical interaction reflects both customers' preference for direct engagement and systemic constraints in adopting digital health communication tools. From the perspective of Relationship Management Theory (RMT), such reliance illustrates the hospital's focus on building trust through direct dialogue, which strengthens accountability and

relational closeness. However, the lack of diversified channels restricts the hospital's capacity to sustain relationships with a wider range of customers who may prefer digital access.

Quantitative findings revealed strong agreement on the use of clear and fluent language and the timely provision of reliable information. Respondents also affirmed that current communication methods facilitate service access. Qualitative insights reinforced these results, with staff highlighting professionalism, empathy, and clarity in communication, while acknowledging operational challenges and underutilization of remote channels. These findings are consistent with RMT's assertion that communication based on empathy, clarity, and transparency enhances trust and mutual understanding, thereby strengthening the quality of the service relationship.

These results further align with prior studies emphasizing the centrality of interpersonal engagement in healthcare. Yawson et al. (2013) noted that customer care desks significantly reduce communication gaps and complaints, a role mirrored by MNH-Mloganzila's emphasis on personal interaction. Govindaraju (2021) similarly observed that interpersonal skills directly influence customers satisfaction, while Ferreira et al. (2023) identified responsiveness as a key determinant of service quality. Likewise, Shamsi et al. (2020) argued that overcoming language barriers improves accessibility and engagement. Together, these studies support the idea, central to RMT, that sustained satisfaction depends on effective relationship-building through open, respectful, and responsive dialogue.

Despite these strengths, the reliance on physical visits contrasts with global trends that promote multichannel strategies. Pandirkar (2021) emphasized the importance of integrating digital platforms to align with evolving customers' expectations for convenience and accessibility, while Altshuler et al. (2023) reported that neglecting modern tools contributes to delays and dissatisfaction. From an RMT perspective, this highlights partial effectiveness: while MNH-Mloganzila excels in face-to-face relationships, its limited use of technology weakens its ability to expand and sustain diverse relational networks with customers over time.

The observed patterns can be explained by contextual realities such as infrastructural limitations, low investment in digital health systems, and cultural preferences for personal contact. Many customers in Tanzania associate physical presence with accountability, while operational challenges such as unanswered calls or delayed digital responses further erode trust in remote platforms. RMT helps explain this tendency: when relational confidence in alternative channels is low, stakeholders fall back on traditional modes of engagement that provide immediate reassurance.

The synthesis of findings underscores the need for MNH-Mloganzila to preserve its strengths in interpersonal engagement while strategically broadening its relational strategies through digital solutions.

Establishing a well-staffed call center, deploying interactive platforms like WhatsApp or live chat systems, and conducting awareness campaigns to increase trust in digital communication are vital interventions. Introducing multilingual aids and digital information displays could further enhance inclusivity and reduce congestion. These measures not only align with global best practices but also reflect RMT's principle that sustainable service relationships are built through multiple communication pathways that foster dialogue, reduce relational distance, and enhance long-term satisfaction

Implications of the Findings

The findings from this study provide several important implications for improving customer care and patient satisfaction at Muhimbili National Hospital – Mloganzila (MNH-Mloganzila) and similar public healthcare institutions. First, the strong reliance on face-to-face interactions as the primary method of engagement underscores the importance of interpersonal relationships in building trust and satisfaction. This suggests that hospital management should continue to prioritize in-person support, particularly for urgent or complex patient needs, as personal contact fosters confidence and reassures patients. At the same time, the preference for physical visits highlights a cultural perception that direct engagement guarantees service quality, signaling the need for awareness campaigns to educate patients about the reliability and efficiency of alternative communication channels.

Second, the findings demonstrate that clear, professional, and empathetic communication is a key driver of patient satisfaction. Staff efforts to provide timely and accurate information, coupled with respectful interaction, reduce confusion, manage conflicts, and support a positive hospital experience. These results imply that continuous staff training in communication, empathy, and customer-centered service remains critical for sustaining high satisfaction levels. Moreover, multilingual support and visual communication tools could enhance inclusivity, particularly for patients facing language barriers, thereby extending the hospital's capacity to meet diverse patient needs.

Third, the underutilization of digital platforms despite their availability indicates a significant opportunity to expand service accessibility and reduce congestion at the customer care desk. This finding implies that MNH-Mloganzila should invest in improving digital infrastructure, including call management systems, interactive mobile platforms, and real-time information displays. Structured digital communication channels with guaranteed response times could enhance trust and encourage adoption among patients who currently rely solely on face-to-face engagement. The integration of digital tools with existing in-person services reflects best practices in multichannel healthcare communication and aligns with the principles of Relationship Management Theory (RMT), which

emphasizes sustaining relationships through diverse and responsive engagement methods.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study highlights the effectiveness of the Customer Care Desk in enhancing patient satisfaction at Muhimbili National Hospital – Mloganzila, particularly through the strategies employed to engage with customers. The findings indicate that face-to-face interaction remains the dominant engagement method, with 80.6% of respondents preferring this approach. While personal interaction strengthens trust, provides immediate assistance, and supports effective relationship-building, it also contributes to congestion and prolonged waiting times, thereby limiting overall service efficiency.

The study further concludes that the use of clear and fluent language, professionalism, and the timely provision of accurate information forms a strong foundation for effective communication, positively influencing customer satisfaction. However, the minimal utilization of alternative communication channels, including telephone lines, social media, and other digital platforms, reveals a significant gap in leveraging technology to improve accessibility and service efficiency. Consequently, although the existing strategies foster meaningful engagement and trust, there is a critical need for MNH-Mloganzila to integrate reliable digital communication tools and implement awareness campaigns to encourage their use. Doing so will reduce physical visits, optimize service delivery, and enhance the overall customer experience.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that Muhimbili National Hospital -Mloganzila strengthen and diversify its customer care strategies to enhance patient satisfaction. While face-to-face interaction remains an effective method for building trust and providing immediate assistance, the hospital should integrate reliable digital communication platforms, including call centers, WhatsApp support, online portals, and live chat systems. These digital channels would complement in-person services, improve accessibility for patients who prefer remote engagement, and reduce congestion at the customer care desk.

To ensure the successful adoption of these alternative communication methods, the hospital should conduct awareness campaigns to educate patients about the reliability, convenience, and security of digital platforms. Such initiatives would encourage usage, build trust in non-physical communication options, and ultimately enhance service efficiency. Additionally, continuous training for customer care staff is essential to maintain professionalism, clear communication, empathy, and conflict resolution skills, while also

ensuring staff are proficient in using digital tools effectively.

At the policy level, there is a need for national healthcare guidelines that support the integration of digital health communication infrastructure. Clear policies mandating hospitals to adopt and maintain multiple communication channels would provide a framework for consistent service delivery and improved patient access. Finally, the hospital should establish mechanisms to monitor and evaluate patient feedback and service performance regularly. This would allow for the refinement of both interpersonal and digital engagement strategies, ensuring continuous improvement in patient satisfaction and strengthening trust in public healthcare services.

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