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Health Issues

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PATIENT SERVICE: HOSPITALS HIRE 'MYSTERY SHOPPERS' FOR EVALUATIONS

Physician offices and hospitals are hiring services that send employees posing as patients to the facilities to help evaluate patient service performance, says the Wall Street Journal.

The so-called "mystery shopping services" are typically geared to the retail and hotel industries, but increasing competition in the health care industry has led hospital administrators to seek their help. According to the latest data from the Mystery Shopping Providers Association, revenue from hospital inquiries has doubled since last year.

- When a mystery shopping service is hired, hospital administrators generally are aware of a time period between a week and a year when mystery shoppers will pose as patients to evaluate hospital service.
- The shoppers typically pose as uninsured patients whose health care is paid for by the facility.
- The shoppers discretely take note of their care when they make phone inquiries, visit physician offices or emergency departments, or in some cases, fake symptoms.

Health care facilities who employ the services say the reports have led them to make a number of changes in the patient experience, including reducing wait times, extending hours for hospital administration workers, providing escorts for patients who have gotten lost and featuring less stressful programming on waiting room televisions.

According to the Journal, the Oct. 1 launch of a Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) project to assess patient satisfaction from hospitals is "one big impetus for focusing on patient experience." The results of the CMS project will be publicly available.

Source: Shirley S. Wang, "Health Care Taps 'Mystery Shoppers' To Improve Service; Hospitals And Doctors Hire Spies to Pose As Patients and Report Back," Wall Street Journal, August 8, 2006.

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