



Patient Safety in a Covid-19 World

How will patient safety concerns change health care as we know it?

Only months ago, patient safety in American hospitals was a given. It was table stakes. Assumed. Of course, COVID-19 has changed that. As we watched, glued to news reports, we saw hospitals preparing to care for thousands of highly infectious, critically ill patients. Images of care givers covered in protective masks and gowns, worried about their own safety, often physically and emotionally exhausted, were inescapable. Yes, patient safety has become a concern, a top concern, in fact.

Consumer criteria for hospitals has shifted dramatically



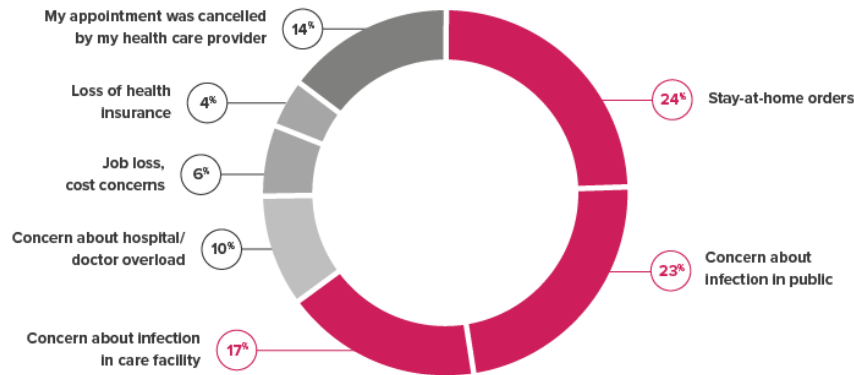
Priorities for choosing a hospital have changed. Our national health care consumer survey has been tracking 13 hospital decision criteria for over a decade, and by April of this year the safe place factor, “a clean and organized environment,” shot up to #2 from #7. The importance of clinical quality ratings has also risen. Personalized care and positive reputation, formerly at the second and third positions, have dropped to eighth and ninth. These are remarkable changes for criteria that over the life of this survey have rarely moved more than one or two positions year over year.

Consumers’ concerns drove them to cancel care. Nearly 63% of consumers in our survey had postponed or avoided some kind of health care. And while hospitals did have to suspend elective surgery during March and April, only 14% of survey respondents said their care was actually cancelled by their provider. Overwhelmingly, people made the decision on their own, with 37% citing concerns about infection, and 27% complying with stay-at-home orders.

They are going to need time. Hospitals are eager to welcome patients back. They are counting on those like the 25% in our survey with postponed cardiac, diagnostic or ortho surgeries to get their care back on track. But consumers may not be in such a big hurry. At this point, fewer than 1 in 5 said they are ready as ever for a needed hospital procedure, and 1 in 7 said they would try to avoid it at all costs. That’s now. Overall, the

largest share, about 25%, say it will take at least a few months before they feel comfortable, and for about 1 in 5 it's going to be 6 to 9 months. That's a much longer time frame than most hospitals are estimating, but there may be ways to shorten the road back to confidence.

Most reasons for postponed care were patient-driven concerns



They are going to need reassurances. As a result, many health care marketers are already reaching out to communicate their stepped-up patient safety measures to key audiences like referring physicians, patients and the community. According to our survey, the most important reassurances of patient safety are testing for patients and caregivers, face

masks and isolation of infected patients. Signs of enforced distancing, extra disinfecting and reduced contact were also important.

Less contact? Could it be that contactless care has become more comforting than the human touch? While consumerism and convenience have been slowly nudging digital advancements in health care, COVID-19 may be the disruption that finally propels adoption of digital health. Based on our survey, consumers are already significantly more comfortable with technologies like telemedicine, location services and voice assistants than they were just eight months ago.

What's most important to consumers: Ranking of patient safety reassurances

1. Testing for staff
2. Face masks
3. Testing for patients
4. Isolation procedures
5. Enforced distancing
6. Extra disinfecting of surfaces
7. No visitor policy
8. Government guidelines adherence
9. Reduced contact
10. Check-in by phone
11. Contactless transactions
12. One-way traffic in facilities
13. Telemedicine options
14. Negative pressure rooms

What to do? It's an unknown road ahead for all health care marketers, but here are three actions that can keep you on track.

1. Communicate your patient safety measures, keeping in mind that patients are no longer taking them for granted.
2. Take frequent pulse checks on your consumers' concerns because they are bound to be unique and changing.
3. Prepare for digitally assisted care like telemedicine and remote monitoring to become the norm in a much less distant future.