# Human Interaction is Core to Delivering Outstanding Patient Experiences

## Dr Gopichand Mannam

Chief Cardiothoracic Surgeon &
Managing Director, Star Hospitals

Dr Gopichand Mannam graduated from Guntur Medical College, in Andhra Pradesh. He obtained an FRCS Edinburgh in General Surgery from the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh and FRCS Glasgow General Surgery from the Royal College of Surgeons  Glasgow. He further underwent extensive training in adult and paediatric cardiac and thoracic surgery at the Royal College of Surgeons, London.

In 1994, he returned to India, and after significant stints at Apollo Hospital, Medwin Hospital and CARE Hospital, started STAR Hospitals, a 320-bed multispecialty hospital. Dr Mannam has performed more than 30,000 heart procedures in his career spanning 27 years. He started HRUDAYA - Cure a Little Heart Foundation in 2005. He was awarded Padma Shri, the fourth-highest civilian award in India, for performing over 2000 free surgeries for children.

Patients and their relatives are naturally prone to high levels of anxiety and emotional distress during hospital visits. In India, the cost associated with medical care further adds to the burden already felt. Healthcare providers must therefore go beyond excellent clinical care and increasingly also address the overall emotional state of the patient. This is the first step in creating special experiences for patients and their families. In a hospital, this can only be achieved by involving everyone, from the CEO to front-line staff. Providing a positive patient experience starts with ourselves - the doctor, the nurse, the caregiver - and is a deeply personal process. At a fundamental level, medical professionals must transcend their highly logic-oriented training and develop a deeper connection to their own and their patients' feelings. The most important qualities that every healthcare professional must possess are empathy and compassion, and the ability to communicate responsively and honestly.

Patient experience is an integral part of quality medical care. Most people are now accustomed to digital experiences offered by hotels and shops across the world, and expect similar experiences from hospitals and healthcare providers. While hospitals can certainly draw on innovations from these industries to enhance convenience, simplify processes and enable seamless communication, patient experience is a much broader topic.

Empathy and compassion determine the capacity to sense the emotional state of the patient. It's all about putting yourself in the patient's position. This enables doctors and nurses to engage patients appropriately at a human level and leads to more effective communication. Even more importantly, empathy and compassion can significantly transform patient sentiment towards the hospital visit and their disease making it a more pleasant journey. Stress and anxiety also often lead to a breakdown in communication and responsiveness. People assimilate and process information differently.
The ability to establish a connect with patients and their families and appropriately communicate with them go a long way in making them feel comfortable and administering quality care. This allows the doctors and nurses to create an environment of trust and explain clinical procedures and diagnoses more effectively.

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Finally trust between doctors and patients can only be maintained through honesty. It is therefore a critical quality that all healthcare professionals have to display proactively. This also means that clinical staff should not hesitate to own their mistakes or lack of knowledge. This emotions-oriented approach, combined with clinical expertise, leads to much better clinical outcomes and provides a more holistic customer experience. At Star Hospitals, from the start, our focus has been to invest time and effort in creating a culture in which everyone at the hospital understands the importance of human side of healthcare.

Technology, if used effectively, can undoubtedly lead to greater convenience and enable better communication.

## Building a patient centric organization

At Star Hospitals, empathy and patient experience is embedded at the core. It is a continuous process with the aim to include customer feedback, leadership transformation, process redesign, culture change, and adoption of new technologies. Training our staff on customer centricity, motivating them, rewarding them for aligning to our vision and values is fundamental to building our brand for the long-term. The tenets of our approach are:

**Common purpose:** Quality healthcare is a collective effort and everyone within the hospital must be aligned around the organizational purpose of delivering a great experience. This requires an organization wide effort and must start at the very top. The leaders who are seen as role models must believe in and contribute to the vision of delivering patient centric healthcare. Awareness about patient experience must then drive self-transformation and looking at care from a patient's perspective. Adhering to this common purpose is therefore a vital step.

**Focus on patient journey:** A great number of clinical and non-clinical staff members are involved in delivering a good experience at the many touch-points patients go through. A mapping of the patient journey together with all hospital staff is critical to understanding issues. This exercise not only helps in identifying key pain points but is also an opportunity to create innovative ways to enhance our ways of working.

**Focus on staff journey:** People are the most important part in the evolution of Star Hospitals' journey. We therefore also need to increasingly focus on the employee journey. Looking at mapping the employee journey not only helps in identifying barriers to the delivery of quality care but should also shape an organizational culture.
It further provides insights into our leadership style, organizational decision making, and training required at all levels.

**Process redesign:** Standard protocols have always been a key tool to ensure quality care but the delivery of outstanding patient experience requires a careful review of our way of working within the entire organization. Lapses in protocols must obviously be flagged and addressed in an easy and transparent manner.

Technology, if used effectively, can play an important role in simplifying and automating these processes and provide access to data.
This will undoubtedly lead to greater convenience and enable better communication.

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## Barriers to delivering experiences

There is a general tendency by most hospitals and healthcare providers in India to emphasize clinical expertise and define experience around clinical outcomes. This is due to the ways of working and established culture at most hospitals.

Incorporating a broader, more empathy-oriented patient care approach in regular staff behavior is easier said than done. Doctors and healthcare staff must become more aware of the importance of patient experience and unlearn many of their existing ways of working.
The easy access to digital channels allows patients to share their hospital visit interactions with hospital staff but also with a wider community. This feedback can be both positive and negative but more importantly provides key insights into customer expectations.

While every hospital and care provider may have unique issues, common challenges are usually the god-like aura around doctors, underestimating patient feedback, the lack of awareness amongst staff and insufficient leverage of technology.

**The doctor with a god-like aura:** In India, historically, doctors have almost had a god-like aura about them. This is understandable as most people are deeply grateful when they finally recover from a serious illness. This however can be a trap; when a doctor believes in this and gets carried away by adulation there is a greater tendency to overlook patient experience and even be too confident in clinical diagnostics. This eventually leads to patient dissatisfaction. Nevertheless, the corollary scenario is also quite frequent when patients do not make expected recovery in their health, the blame often falls on the doctor alone.

**Underestimating the power of patient feedback:** With the widespread availability of information on the internet, patients are increasingly well-informed and have a strong voice with regards to their hospital experiences.
They read reviews about hospital, clinics, and individual doctors.
They perform comparisons and take second opinions before making decisions on their health. They are also quick to post feedback and reviews on social media channels which can create a significant impact. We need to be aware of the fact that a patient may have had a great experience during their hospital stay but encountered a problem during billing or parking. The negative feeling will often completely reverse their initial positive assessment. It is therefore critical for all staff at the hospital to realize how their actions may impact patient and the hospital's reputation overall.

**Lack of awareness and education**
Patient experience is sum of experiences at every touch-point within a hospital. Even a few people displaying the wrong attitude towards patients will have a serious impact. Even though there are many factors that contribute to this problem, staff social background and education levels is a critical one. This has a direct influence on values and beliefs which in turn contribute to quality standards. Unfortunately, little attention is paid to include topics such as empathy and relationship building in medical, nursing or hospital administration courses. My hope is that this attitude will change progressively.

**Leveraging technology:** Meaningful implementation of technology can reduce the length of time-consuming activities for nurses and doctors. This in turn would free up their time to focus on patients and enhance convenience for patients. It is important for IT teams at hospitals to also demonstrate empathy and compassion in order to look at usability and benefits from the patient and staff perspective. Unfortunately, the few technology resources within hospitals often lack a deeper understanding of patient care and experience.