

PUBLIC RELATIONS AS A TOOL FOR EFFECTIVE HEALTHCARE MANAGEMENT

Kehinde Oladele Joseph, Igbozuruike Romanus Chukwuemeka



Department of Business Management, Covenant University, Ota, Ogun State, Nigeria.

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Corresponding Author:

Kehinde Oladele Joseph
Department of Business
Management, Covenant University,
Ota, Ogun State, Nigeria.
oladele.kehinde@covenantuniversity
.edu.ng



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ABSTRACT

This study focused on Public Relations as a tool for effective healthcare management, using Hetta Medical Centre, Ota, Ogun State, Nigeria, as a study, with the aim of discovering the relationships between good public relations and indices of Hetta's Management performance. As a result, self-administered questionnaires were given to purposeful samples of both patients at Hetta, and Hetta staff. Correlation test statistics was applied to data generated, and results show that the correlation coefficients are all positive, and correlation coefficient of the satisfaction items with public relations items ($r = 0.327, 4.92, 0.502, 0.511, 0.437, 0.310$) and ($r = 0.293, 0.514, 0.388, 0.360, 0.370, 0.312$) are significant and positive at the acceptable region of 0.01 and 0.05. This showed that there is a positive relationship between good public relations and Hetta Medical Centre's management performance. The study recommends that private hospitals should practice good public relations, train and retrain both medical and non-medical staff in professional patient care, and invest in state-of-the art medical equipment, among others.

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INTRODUCTION

Healthcare is a service to the sick, the mentally and physically incapacitated members of the society who need medical attention and help. This service is provided by health institutions called hospitals, clinics, medical centres, etc. These health institutions are either publicly owned i.e. government hospitals, or privately owned. Other than public hospitals which are supported by the government, private health institutions, i.e. private hospitals and clinics, are business enterprises, which must be properly managed if they must survive, grow and prosper.

Weihrich, Cannice, and Koontz (2011) assert that "the term enterprise refers to a business, government agency, hospital, university, and any other type of organization" (p.5). Like any other enterprise, private hospitals must be managed to generate the revenue and profit for business survival, growth, and expansion. "Effective management", according to Weihrich et al. (2011) "is the concern of the corporation president, the hospital administrator, the government first-line supervisor, the boy scout leader, the church bishop, the baseball manager, and the university president" (p.5). Continuing, Weihrich et al. (2011) say that "management is the process of designing and maintaining an environment in which individuals working together in groups efficiently accomplish selected aims" (p.4). This definition is supported by the definition of management in 1918 by Mary Parker Follett who defined management as "the art of getting things done through people" (Holt, 1993, p.3). This is because management according to Drucker (1968) "is the specific organ of the business enterprise specifically

charged with making resources productive, that is with the responsibility for organized economic advance" (p.14), which is the supplies of economic goods and services. In doing this, the business enterprise must produce the profit required to cover its future risks and maintain intact the wealth-producing capacity of its resources (Drucker, 1968). To achieve the required minimum profit, the business enterprise must have a purpose. Drucker says there is only one business purpose: "to create a customer" (p.52). According to Drucker "it is the customer who determines what a business is... what the customer thinks he is buying, what he considers value is decisive" (p.53).

Statement of Research Problem: Consumer marketing entails identification of customer wants and needs, and satisfaction of such at a profit. This requires the deployment of the 7P's of the marketing mix – product, Price, Place, promotion, People, Process, and physical evidence. But private hospitals are forbidden to use media advertising, which is part of promotion, by the code of medical ethics in Nigeria.

The product of a healthcare provider, hospital for example, is medical service; and a medical service is intangible. This intangibility creates a problem. According to Asiegbu, Igwe, and Akekue-Alex (2012) "intangibility of services poses some serious challenges for marketing. One is that a potential customer cannot examine a service before buying it, so the marketer must provide cues about the qualities and benefits of the service" (p.137). This is because the production of services and their consumption is simultaneous, with the result that customer's satisfaction is

immediately measurable and forms an instant feedback to company operation.

This is the reason in private healthcare service delivery, there is the need for merging the Product, People, Process and Physical evidence so that both medical and non-medical staff that relate with patients can demonstrate appropriate professional competence, wear the right attitude, use requisite gadgets and adopt appropriate procedure when handling patients. This is even more so as hospitals are forbidden to use media advertising to attract patients. In this way, healthcare service delivery can be tangibilized to provide time, place, form, and psychological utilities that satisfy the goals of both the patient and the healthcare provider (Asiegbu et al., 2012, p.137).

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to examine the role of public relations as a tool for achieving effective healthcare management. However, the specific objectives of the study are: (i) To examine the relationship between good public relations and patients' satisfaction with the way they are attended to at Hetta Medical Centre; (ii) To find out the relationship between good public relations and patient's patronage retention by Hetta Medical Centre.

Research Hypotheses

To achieve the objectives of this research, the study raised the following two hypotheses which are stated in the form of null hypotheses. These are: (i) That there is no relationship between good public relations and patients' satisfaction with the way they are attended to at Hetta Medical Centre; (ii) That there is no relationship between good public relations and patients' patronage retention by Hetta Medical Centre.

Significance of the Study

The application of public relations to health care marketing is a new phenomenon. Interestingly, readers will find that public relations are not an activity to be left to a particular group of people called public relations practitioners. It is an activity to be embraced by everybody working in any healthcare institution for the achievement of the organization's objectives. It should also be noted that without good public relations, activities in the marketing area might fail an organization. Accordingly, understanding the role of public relations in any organization is imperative for management and workers. Additionally, it is hoped that findings of this research will be beneficial to other health institutions who have not embraced public relations or who have not understood how it works as they will realize that their un-competitiveness is because of their poor PR. We also hope this study will ginger the federal ministry of health to take steps and urge all medical institutions in Nigeria both private and public to establish public relations departments in their respective organizations. Since healthcare public relations is new and growing, public relations consultants would benefit by widening both their experience and the breadth of their clientele through making foray into this specialized area. The general level of quality health service delivery will also rise as competition intensifies and patients get better healthcare service, which benefits society.

Literature Review

Conceptual Frame Work

"Public relations work is all about developing effective relationship between organizations and groups that are important to them including the media, customers, employees, investors, community leaders and members,

activists groups, and government agencies. These relationships should benefit both parties" (Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman & Toth, 2009)

In other words "public relations has to do with the total communications of an organization" (Skinner, Vonessen, Mersham, & Motan, 2010, p.4). Thus, fundamental to public relations is the establishment of mutual understanding between different parties, i.e. an organization on the one hand and special publics on the other hand (Skinner et al., 2010). Accordingly, "public relations has a key role to play in developing understanding and support for a particular cause or event. Essentially it helps to define and explain relationships of mutual benefits between organizations and their key stakeholders, both among its own employees and with customers and clients with whom it does business. These must be managed rather than be allowed to develop haphazardly." (Skinner et al., 2010, p.4). "In a modern democracy, every organization survives ultimately only by public consent. This is why public relations should enable the organization to influence public opinion, judgment and behavior, with the obvious implication that the organization is dependent on the moral and financial support of its various publics in order to survive". (Skinner et al., 2010, p.5). Therefore, "public relation is obviously about communications. It is about persuading people to accept your ideas, your products, your company and perhaps take action along the specific lines you require" (Watts, 1977, p.1)

The term public relations was first used in 1882 by Dorman Eaton, a lawyer, when he addressed the Yale law school on "The Public Relations and Duties of the Legal Profession" (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p.14). "Public relations" had not been used to describe the communication professional we know today, until Bernays coined the term "public relations counsel" in the 1920s (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p.14).

Public Relations: A Definitional Clarification

It has not been possible to agree on one definition of public relations because different people, institutions and professional bodies give their own definition (Osuji, 1990). What has been observed, however, is that "some definitions of public relations are positivist, that is, they are based on explaining what is involved in the practice of public relations, or what it achieves within organizations. Others are normative and state a vision of what PR should be" (Theaker & Yaxley, 2013, p.6). However, the definitions given here are not attached with either the positivist or normative label.

The British Institute of Public Relations in its November 1987 revised definition states that "public relations practice is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organization and its publics" (Jefkins, 1992, p.7). The key words here are "planned and sustained effort", which means that PR activity is organized as a campaign or programme and it is a continuous activity (Jefkins, 1992). The words planned and sustained suggest that public relations is not accidental. The company planned it and consciously tries to maintain and sustain it in the eyes of the publics. Another observation is that public relations practice is defined as "the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its public" (Bowman & Ellis, p.3). This is to say that

organizations strive to be understood and accepted by its publics.

A second definition by the World Assembly of Public Relations Association in Mexico City in August 1978 says that “public relations practice is the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organization leaders, and implementing planned programme of action, which will serve both organizations and the public interest” (Osuji, 1990, p.14). This definition talks about “analysis of trends” which means that a PR programme must be preceded by market research. Grunig and Hunt (1984) quoted the following definition from Public Relations News that: “public relations is the management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual or an organization with the public interests, and plans and executes a programme of action to earn public understanding and acceptance” (p.8).

This definition is similar to the previous one by relating the phrase “evaluate public attitudes” with research, and through research, organizational policies are harmonized with public interest before a programme of action is executed to gain public understanding and acceptance.

Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) recommended the following two definitions:

- i. “Public relations helps an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other” (Skinner et al., 2010, p.4)
- ii. “Public relations is an organization’s efforts to win the cooperation of groups of people” (Skinner et al., 2010, p.4) in (Lesley, 1987).

These two definitions are similar in the sense that two-way communication is implied by the word “mutually” in the first, and “between” in the second.

Public Relations Institute of South Africa (PRISA) states that “public relations is the management, through communication, of perceptions and strategic relationships between an organization and its internal and external stakeholders” (Skinner et al., 2010, p.4). Thus, it is important for organizations, even individuals to take seriously how they project themselves, for the “publics’ perception of them are all-important, whether based on fact or fiction” (Skinner et al., 2010, p.4). And the word “communication” must not be seen in its planned form only, but must be understood to mean “passing a message by whatever means” for as Watts (1977) says, “everything the company does that impinges on the outside world and on its employees is an involvement in communications, a message of some type is left behind” (p.3).

According to Skinner et al. (2010) public relations exhibit the following characteristics:

- **It is Dynamic:** Public relations process is one of continuous and constant change and adjustment in order to maintain old relationships and build new ones.
- **It is Analytical:** it is a process of determining and analyzing a situation and the factors influencing it, as well as one of evaluating the progress of any remedial or other action
- **It is Planned:** goals are set and priorities are determined in accordance with the problem or situation analysis and within the constraints of time and budget

- **It Implies Action:** this means the execution of planned strategies and the implementation of alternative strategies in order to cope with the publics’ changing needs and demands. In this sense, public relations, in its purest and most effective form, should be proactive and not reactive.
- **It Requires Evaluation:** performance is evaluation in terms of the achievement of goals
- **It Demands Adjustment:** public relations should be executed in a flexible manner in order to adjust to goals altered as a result of for example, underachievement or the changing needs of the publics (p.6).

Public Relations as a Management Function

In any organization, it is at the senior management level that the organization’s policies are fashioned out. “Senior management decides strategies, weighs the available options, and directs all other levels of operations to achieve the set goals and agreed objectives” (Salu, 1994, p.238). This is why he (Salu) observes that “the public relations practitioner is now accepted by progressive management as the ears and mouth of the organization. He therefore belongs to the senior management level where his input has been the greatest effect” (p.238). Accordingly, top management must be involved in the organization’s public relations activities, for as Watts (1977) says: “the explosion of the public relations function into every aspect of a corporation’s life has meant that the managing director and his board has to be involved whether they want to or not” (p.2). Commenting further, Watts says that “like the poor, public relations is always with us. And senior management must understand it and be involved in it, even if they use trained executives to actually carry out the job for them” (p.3). “A management position affords the public relations practitioner the opportunity of being sensitive to and coming into contact with both internal and external publics, whose collective views constitute public opinion” (Skinner et al., 2010, p.6).

Public Relations and Marketing Communications

Media cost today is making public relations a more attractive proposition in marketing communications than is advertising, as it costs more to reach the same target audience today than yesterday. The high noise level, which reduces the impact and penetration of advertising has not helped matters as consumers tune off their radio or TV set during advertising in a news programme. “Both of these situations can be alleviated by intelligent supplemental public relations work – getting the message across at low cost in a more subtle and credible way, using techniques such as third-party endorsement, editorial approval, or general market stimulation. The result will be an informal, well-disposed and receptive consumer” (Skinner et al., 2010, p.47). This is because according to Ibidunni (2012) “public relations does not aim to sell only, but is also to secure sympathetic, favourable public recognition for the particular firm company and the firm’s products as well as create a favourable environment for business transactions by building a friendly feeling for the firm in its publics” (p.215)

Empirical Framework

Empirical framework is to help support the analysis of data and interpretation of findings of this study. Particularly, it is envisaged that findings from previous

similar work will provide the necessary corroboration to validate or reject postulated hypotheses.

Some previous studies are hereby used to support the current effort at finding how public relations is used by Hetta's management to effectively manage the hospital. According to Amiresmaili, et al. (2012) one of these studies is "measuring levels of public relations in hospitals by Amiresmaili, Rostami, and Isfahani (2012).According to these authors "a lot of factors decrease public relations and image of hospitals and thus cause people to complain" (p.10).

In their further remark, Amiresmaili, et al. say the following are ways of perceiving levels of public relations in hospitals:

- i. Patients' satisfaction level
- ii. Opinion of most clients,
- iii. Complaints received
- iv. Medical employees' substitution
- v. Adaptation level of care providers to patients
- vi. Amount of hospital received gifts
- vii. Patients refusal of physicians prescriptions

Amiresmaili, et al. (2012) also reported descriptive analytical type research carried out in all hospitals of Zarand town concerning the role of public relations in improving efficiency and productivity of hospitals.

The statistical universe was all patients hospitalized in the hospitals to which a two-section (demographic specifications and aspects of public relations) questionnaire was administered

The result showed that 27% of subjects mentioned that the hospital kept all its promises and had the ability to perform all its promises. Most of them (25%) said that the hospital worried about the patients' welfare, asked the patients to participate in decision making process and helped those who had low income. Most patients (24%) were satisfied with employees and manager's fair behavior. 30% of patients announced that the hospital guided them well. In the study, low-income patients were more satisfied with the hospital ($p < 0.05$). There was a significant relationship between satisfaction level and personnel's behavior ($p < 0.05$). 23% of patients were satisfied with personnel's behavior. 22% mentioned that hospital wanted to maintain its relationship with patients (Amiresmaili, et al., 2012).

The study concluded by saying "several factors decreased the level of public relations and the image of hospitals; recognizing these factors can increase public relations in hospitals" (Amiresmaili, et al., 2012, p.9)

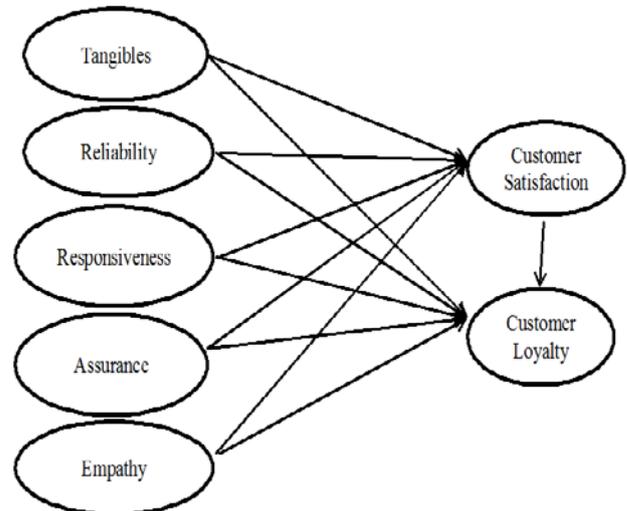
Another empirical framework was a case study of public relations management at Lucile Packard Children's Hospital (LPCH), which was undertaken to explain communications management during a certain period of time to ensure no encroachment on the current state of public relations for the community and Physician Relations Department (CPRD) at (LPCH). "One of the goals of the CPRD was to educate the community about the hospital so they will use and pay for its services. Another goal was to encourage physicians to purchase phone triage services that bring in revenue and referrals to LPCH" (Powelson & Plowman, 2010 p.1).

All these was to ensure that the hospital promote itself to stay profitable (Powelson & Plowman). Accordingly, Yeboah, et al., (2014) in Pollutse, Kalda, and Lember (2000) observe that "identifying patients' opinions

is critical for the evaluation of medical service systems" (p.145).

In trying to seek patients' opinion, the SERVQUAL model identifies five main areas of customer interest and uses questionnaire with specific questions to find out customers views. The five areas that SERVQUAL questionnaire measures include: reliability, assurance, responsiveness, empathy, and tangibility of services. This is shown graphically below.

Elements of the SERVQUAL Model of Service Quality Model



Source: Yeboah, M.A., Ansong, M.O., Yeboah, F.A., Antwi, H.A., & Yiranbon, E (May, 2014). Emperical Validation of Patients Expectation of Service Quality in Ghanian Hospitals: An Integrated Model Approach. American International Journal of Social Sciences. Vol3. No. 3 (p.146)

Ten hospitals in Japan that have applied the SERVQUAL model provide explanations for the various elements. "Assurance of services is to find out if the services of the hospital are backed by adequate employees with adequate knowledge in their chosen line of duty and whether the customers think they are courteous enough when they are serving them" (Yeboah, et al., 2014) in (Krogstand, Hofoss, & Hyortahl, 2004). This knowledge is important as it helps to find out if the patients have trust and confidence in the hospital and the services they are providing. In doing that, the hospitals use the questionnaire to solicit the opinion of patients on whether the hospitals staff (both medical and paramedical) instill confidence in them to continue coming to the hospital and whether they feel they are safe when transacting business with the hospital (Yeboah, et al., 2014) in (Nuti, Bonini, Murate, & Vainieri, 2009)

The consistency in extending courteous service and having the right knowledge to administer drugs and other prescriptions as well as answer all the questions of the staff are all important for the patients and that helps the hospital to know the service gap in patients' assurance of their services.

Another important consideration of customer satisfaction as measured by SERVQUAL is empathy of services provided by the organizations. In the hospital setting, "empathy in service delivery is very important for the patients considering the fact that the people need care and affection as well as attention since most sick people make unusual demand of health professionals because of the pain they may be going through" (Yeboah, et al., 2014) in (Saltman,

Bankaus, Kait, 2006). “This is the reason SERVQUAL engages hospitals to find out from their patients whether the services which its staff are providing are caring and personalized enough because everyone comes with a different problem or challenge” (Yeboah, et al., 2014) in (Saltman & Busse, 2002). By this means, patients’ opinion about the hospital could be ascertained.

Methodology: The overall plan to achieve the objectives of this study was delineated by the research methodology. The research design adopted was explained together with the population of study. Available sampling techniques and the choice of appropriate sample technique, and sample frame were discussed.

This study adopted the explanatory research design to explain how Hetta management used public relations to effectively manage Hetta Medical Centre’s operations.

The survey method was used to elicit responses from respondents who were samples from the population of study through self-administered questionnaire. The survey method is good to collect original data from a large population.

According to Babbie (2005) ‘the population for study is that group usually of people about whom we want to draw

Table 1 Correlations

		The hospital has the right personnel and facilities for professional medical service delivery	The doctors at the hospital are competent	The doctors at the hospital are caring	The nurses at the hospital are professional	The nurses at the hospital are friendly	The non-medical staff at the hospital are polite and helpful	You are satisfied with the way the doctors and nurses attend to you at the hospital	You are satisfied with the medical services you receive from the hospital
The hospital has the right personnel and facilities for professional medical service delivery	Pearson correlation	1							
	Sig. (2-tailed)								
	N	150							
The doctors at the hospital are competent	Pearson correlation	.346**	1						
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000							
	N	150	150						
The doctors at the hospital are caring	Pearson correlation	.295**	.502**	1					
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000						
	N	150	150	150					
The nurses at the hospital are professional	Pearson correlation	.389**	.362**	.391**	1				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000					
	N	150	150	150	150				
The nurses at the hospital are friendly	Pearson correlation	.202*	.256**	.379**	.446**	1			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.013	.002	.000	.000				
	N	150	150	150	150	150			
The non-medical staff at the hospital are polite and helpful	Pearson correlation	.155	.157	.258**	.441**	.433**	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.058	.055	.001	.000	.000			
	N	150	150	150	150	150	150		
You are satisfied with the way the doctors and nurses attend to you at the hospital	Pearson correlation	.327**	.492**	.502**	.511**	.437**	.310**	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000		
	N	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	
You are satisfied with the medical services you receive from the hospital	Pearson correlation	.293**	.514**	.388**	.360**	.370**	.312**	.648**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	

conclusions’ (p.113). Deborah (2013) in Asika (2009) observed that “a population may be finite in which case its size or extent is conceivable and estimable. On the other hand, a population may be infinite, that is to say a complete count of all elements or subjects that make up that population, e.g. all grains of sand in the world cannot possibly be made” (p.63). The population for this study consisted of all the staff of Hetta Medical Centre and all adult literate patients that attend Hetta Medical Centre for medical service at Ota, in Ogun State, Nigeria.

A total of 150 copies of questionnaire were administered to patients in Hetta Medical Centre, and all the copies were returned. From the analysis above, this is a 100% return. This is because the researchers were at the hospital daily, from 7th to 27th February, 2016 to distribute questionnaires to patients who attended the hospital for medical services on those days, and who promptly filled and returned same to the researchers immediately.

Testing For Hypothesis One: H₀₁; There is no relationship between good public relations and patients’ satisfaction with the way they are attended to at Hetta Medical Centre.

Kehinde/Public Relations As A Tool For Effective Healthcare Management

	N	150	150	150	150	150	150	150	150
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***.* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**.* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Interpretation: The correlation Coefficient Matrix table revealed the nature of relationship that exists between good public relations and patients' satisfaction. It was observed from the table that all the variable items from the two variables have significant correlations with each other. The correlation coefficient of the two satisfaction items with the public relations items are as follows; (r = 0.327, 4.92, 0.502, 0.511, 0.437, 0.310) and (r = 0.293, 0.514, 0.388, 0.360, 0.370, 0.312) at 0.0001 significant level.

Decision; Since there are significant correlation coefficients among the variables within the acceptable region of 0.01 and 0.05, the study rejects H₀₁.

Discussion: The implication is that there is significant positive relationship between good public relations and

patients' satisfaction at the way they are attended to at Hetta Medical Centre. This conclusion is not surprising given that Hetta's staff affirmed that Hetta's management policy is to render first class medical services to patients. This they executed by acquiring state-of-the-art medical equipment coupled with the professionalism of both the doctors and nurses. The confidence exuded by the medical staff as a result, together with their empathetic patient's care could engender nothing but patients' satisfactions. In other words, good public relations create customer satisfaction for organizations.

Testing For Hypothesis Two: H₀₂; There is no relationship between good public relations and of patients' patronage retention by Hetta Medical Centre.

		Patients are always attended to promptly at the hospital	Patients problem are treated with professional dispatch	Patients problems are treated sympathetically	Cost consideration has not prevented patients from receiving good medical service at the hospital	The hospital environment is comfortable	You will always use the hospital when the need arises
Patients are always attended to promptly at the hospital	Pearson Correlation	1					
	Sig. (2-tailed)						
Patients problem are treated with professional dispatch	Pearson Correlation	.358**	1				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000					
Patients problems are treated sympathetically	Pearson Correlation	.368**	.351**	1			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000				
Cost consideration has not prevented patients from receiving good medical service at the hospital	Pearson Correlation	.275**	.284**	.266**	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	.000	.001			
The hospital environment is comfortable	Pearson Correlation	.436**	.287**	.343**	.070	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.396		
You will always use the hospital when the need arises	Pearson Correlation	.414**	.274**	.433**	.166*	.463**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.001	.000	.043	.000	
	N	150	150	150	150	150	150

***.* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**.* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Interpretation: The correlation Coefficient Matrix table revealed the nature of relationship that exists between good public relations and patients' patronage retention. It was observed from the table that all the variable items from the two variables have significant correlations with each other. The correlation coefficient of the retention items with the public relations items are as follows; (r = 0.414, 0.274, 0.433, 0.166, 0.463) at 0.0001 significant level.

Decision; Since there are significant correlation coefficients among the variables within the acceptable region of 0.01 and 0.05, the study rejects H₀₂.

DISCUSSION

The implication is that there is significant positive relationship between good public relations and patient's patronage retention by Hetta Medical Centre. This situation resulted for the following reasons:

1. Hetta offers good medical services
2. These services are augmented by the competence, attitude, and mannerisms of both the medical and non-medical staff, which are pleasant and acceptable to patients.
3. Patients find the hospital's environment comfortable.

The combinations of these factors have not only resulted in satisfaction, but have also ensured that patients come back to Hetta when they need medical attention. That is to say patients have been conditioned to being brand loyal to Hetta, making repeat purchases by repeated medical attention they seek at Hetta; and in the process, Hetta has been able to retain the patronage of most of them. Accordingly, therefore, good public relations is good business.

Summary of Findings

Based on the objectives of this study, the following decisions were scientifically arrived at. From the two hypotheses, there are several methodical and empirical implications. Hypothesis one revealed that there is a positive relationship between good public relations and patients' satisfaction with the way they are attended to at Hetta Medical Centre. The implication is that in any healthcare organization, whose services (products) are intangible, the attitude and competence of the service personnel or staff are very important in engendering customer satisfaction. Carelessness or inadequate attention to patient's needs can result in patient displeasure and this may result to losing their loyalty.

Hypothesis two reveals that there is positive relationship between good public relations and patients' patronage retention by Hetta. The implication again is that any healthcare organization must pay serious attention to the quality and consistency of its services. On no account must the patient be taken for granted. On each and every occasion, the medical service provided must be impeccable, and the service personnel (doctors, nurses, lab technician, etc.) must be diligent, careful, polite, friendly, empathetic and sympathetic. The hospital environment must also complement the services provided. In other words, the hospital environment must be comfortable and congenial; other healthcare personnel must also exhibit appropriate behaviour and competence. In short, all hospital policies and personnel activities must dovetail to patient satisfaction. This is the only way to ensure repeat purchase, which is retention of patient's patronage.

CONCLUSIONS

The study has established that there is a positive relationship between good public relations and patients' satisfaction with the way they are attended to at Hetta Medical Centre. The implication of this result is that for healthcare organizations, public relations creates that augmented product that patients desire. What the patients buys is a bundle of satisfaction that comprises the core product (service) and the public relations input that augments it. It follows therefore that healthcare organizations should use public relations to promote the sales of their services.

The study has also revealed that positive relationship exists between good public relations and patients' patronage retention by Hetta Medical Centre. The implication is that since business in general thrives on repeat purchase, healthcare institutions should use good public relations to retain the patronage of their patients and prevent them from being wooed away by the competition- other hospitals. Findings from the research have also shown that there is a positive relationship between good public relations and the growing number of patients going to Hetta for medical services. This implies that it is important for hospitals to generate good word-of-mouth promotion for both their medical services and organizations, through their public relations efforts.

Finally, the study established that there is a positive relationship between good public relations and improving financial performance of Hetta Medical Centre. This follows that hospitals should pay great attention to public relations implications of their operations if they are to achieve good financial performance.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the research findings and suggestions for improvement made by patients, the following recommendations are made. This will help to strengthen Hetta management, guide other hospitals when implementing their public relations programmes, and assist future researchers embarking upon hospital public relations project.

- i. Professional public relations practitioners should be engaged by hospitals either on a staff basis or as consultants to assist top management in articulating corporate policies, and in assisting the various departments in projecting proper and consistent desirable image for their hospitals.
- ii. Private hospitals should see themselves as business enterprises, which should adopt modern

marketing techniques for survival and competitive success.

- iii. Staff should be well trained and retained so as to be abreast on modern medical knowledge, and management should always maintain communication with staff so as to emphasize the importance of courtesy, politeness, friendliness and empathy in patient care.
- iv. Hospitals should be proactive in epidemic management. When news break in any part of the world about any epidemic, hospitals should communicate methods of prevention to their patients, their immediate community, install necessary gadget for screening patients and take all measures to ensure no affected patients is treated or admitted in the hospital ignorantly. The Ebola epidemic is a reference point where some patients were admitted in some hospitals without the doctors and nurses knowing the nature of the disease.
- v. Hospitals should always upgrade their equipment to the latest in the industry and also adopt newest processes and technology for the benefit of their patients
- vi. All surrounding bushes and gutters should be cleaned to prevent the breeding of rodents and insects harmful to human beings.

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