

Quality of health services in the public system in Greece

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Abstract: *Quality in health care is a multidimensional and highly complex concept that relates both to the very nature of health services and to the way health services are provided to citizens. The quality of health services is directly related to their ability to meet the needs of patients and improve their health status. Today, all developed countries are making a great effort to ensure the provision of quality health services to its citizens, so that they can have good health and consequently enjoy a good quality of life. Both the competent state bodies and the administrations of health care units, in order to be able to provide quality health services, it is necessary to proceed first and foremost to measure and evaluate them. Various indicators have been constructed to monitor the quality of health services, one of the most well-known and widely used indicators for assessing the quality of health services is the satisfaction of users both overall from the health services they receive and from their individual dimensions. The indicator of user satisfaction with the health services provided is the instrument chosen in this thesis to investigate the quality of health services provided by a public health system.*

Keywords: Management health, Quality of health, decision making, patient satisfaction, health services.

I. INTRODUCTION

Quality of health services in the public system in Greece. One of the most important and demanding areas of operation of any modern and socially expanding state entity is the health sector, a sector that faces a triple challenge internationally: a) the demand of the global community (society, organizations) to provide equivalent health care to all citizens, b) the ever-increasing cost of providing health care services, and c) the need to introduce and implement new technologies based on efficiency and their cost-effectiveness (Souliotis et al. 2016 ; Ale Abuosi A, 2015).

Global challenges on the health sector are crucial in order to face the upcoming problems such as Sars-Cov2, epidemics, living conditions, weaknesses in primary health care, costs in the health sector (Etienne et al., 2020; El Bcheraoui et al., 2020; Kruk et al., 2015; Haldane et al., 2017; Legido-Quigley & AsgariJirhandeh, 2018; Haldane et al., 2021; Barker et al., 2020; Shadmi et al., 2020; Her, 2020; WHO, 2020). At the international level and in the context of these challenges, reforms are being introduced to modernize the existing health system and improve health services. Providing health services through an organized health care system in order to maximize the level of health at the individual and collective level is a major political and economic challenge for all administrations, regardless of whether the health care system is subject to public or private funding (Proikaki et al., 2017).

Patient satisfaction or perception of patient care is a key issue for the entire healthcare system, which reveals the "systematic collection of perceptions of social interactions with health and behavioral outcomes for patients" (MacAllister, et al., 2016; Kruk Met al., 2015). Good healthcare management is not associated with unrealistic expectations of success at all stages and in all forms of healthcare.

According to Ferrand et al., (2017), this is a particularly sensitive area for various deficits in society itself. Instead, we expect good governance in the sector to be able to set priorities, to be flexible and, above all, to be able to deal with the circumstances as they are. This is why the central category of analysis is the issue of patient satisfaction. The

hypothesis of the thesis is that effective governance and organizational justice increase patient satisfaction and are key indicators of the quality of the healthcare system as a complex measure of both medical outcomes and the human dimension of care, generally illness and continuous improvement of the environment.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Donabedian in 1980 was the first to focus on issues of improvement in health quality. According to him, quality is the type of care that is expected to maximize the patient's benefit, taking into account the benefits and losses involved in the process of care. According to Donabedian, the provision of health services has three dimensions (Tountas 2003; HerM 2020; Donabedian A 1980).

Firstly, the interpersonal part, which refers to the psychological dimension of the treatment of the patient by medical staff and other health professionals (Nelson A, 1996). It is also related to the behavior of health professionals towards it, determined by professional ethics, the characteristics of society and what patients expect. Secondly, the technical part, which refers to the application of medical science and technology in order to treat the patient better and thirdly, the infrastructure, which relates to the space, the environment and the conditions under which care and comfort are offered in health services. A few years later, in 1988, he argued that care is evaluated not only in the technical part, but more generally and even includes the patient's preferences, while two years later, in 1990, with his article "The Seven Pillars of Quality", he emphasized the characteristics of health care that contribute to a clearer definition of quality characterized by clinical efficacy, effectiveness, efficiency, optimality, acceptability, legitimacy, and equity.

Nelson in 1996 defined quality in health care facilities as the degree to which health care services increase the likelihood of the desired outcome due to good professional knowledge. The American Medical Association considered in 1990 that high-quality care is medical care that continuously contributes to the improvement of quality maintenance. Medical care is characterized by early intervention and disease prevention, patient information and efficient use of resources.

According to the World Health Organization (2020), the quality of health services is the provision of diagnostic and therapeutic procedures capable of ensuring the best possible health outcomes, within the capabilities of modern medical science that aims at maximum patient satisfaction. Based on the above definitions, it is clear that quality in health care is synonymous with patient satisfaction, the provision of necessary and effective services, and the control of the benefits and costs arising from them. (Raftopoulos and Ikonopoulou, 2003).

Studying the literature we noticed that many researchers such as (Alexiadis & Sigalas, 1999; Mosadeghrad, 2013; Thanasasas, 2019; Globenko & Sianova, 2012; Abuosi, 2015; Tountas et al., 2003; Etienne et al., 2020; Koutsimbelis, 2018; Siakotou, 2019; Saturday, 2020; Sillero Sillero & Zabalegui, 2018) in order to assess the quality of health services provided by the public health system of a country, they recorded the degree of user satisfaction from the different dimensions (e.g., from the process of making appointments, from the process of arrival at the health facility, from the process of waiting until the examination, from the period of hospitalization, by the practice and health professionals, the discharge procedure, etc.) the health services they receive. Although, the investigation of the degree of satisfaction of users of health care units is an object that has been studied to a significant extent, it is always at the center of interest of researchers as the conditions in health care units change over time and especially in a period of economic - health crisis, such as the one that Greece has been experiencing in recent years. Various research questions are generated (Malamu Th, 2016), through which the quality of health services provided in the public health system in Greece will be assessed:

- 1) What is the level of satisfaction of health service users with the public health system?
- 2) To what extent are users of public health services satisfied with their overall experience?
- 3) How do the health services offered by the public health system affect the quality of life of the respondents?
- 4) How do the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents influence their attitude towards the public health care system and their level of satisfaction?

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to be able to answer all the research questions mentioned by the researchers we observed that the use of structured and unstructured questionnaires is extensive. For this reason many researchers made use of structured and unstructured questionnaires. In order to enable the collection of the necessary primary data, a questionnaire was used, which was to be completed by the users of health services of the public health system. The questionnaire is a widely used research tool and is chosen by those researchers who aim to carry out a survey based on the presentation of data on the subject under investigation (Cohen et al. , 2008; Savvou E. 2020). Through the answers given to the questionnaire, the degree of satisfaction with the health services provided (nursing, administrative, etc.) was recorded in order to identify the weak points of the public health system.

The questionnaire-based method of analysis is directly affected in terms of the validity of the results and, by extension, the conclusions to be drawn, by the reliability of the answers given by the respondents. It is often observed that respondents either do not take the whole process seriously or do not understand the questions accurately, thus reducing the credibility of the whole research process.

Based on what was reported any survey based on questionnaire completion must record whether respondents answered the questions consistently. Due to this, with the help modern statistical packages or software such as Spss, the consistency of the questionnaire answers will be assessed by estimating the Cronbach's a coefficient for each group of answers concerning relevant items. Cronbach's coefficient a, takes values from 0 to 1 and indicates that the answers given were answered relatively consistently when it takes values close to 1. In contrast, this coefficient indicates that the responses given are not consistent when it takes values closer to 0.

IV. QUALITY OF HEALTH SERVICES

In recent years, the quality of health services has become a crucial issue as it is directly related to the health of patients and the health of the citizens of a country. Quality, as already mentioned in the above section, is a crucial characteristic of the services produced as it refers to the extent to which these services can satisfy the needs and expectations of consumers (Papanikolaou, 2007). However, in health services the concept of quality becomes even more complex as it does not only refer to the extent to which patients' needs are met but also to many other dimensions such as the elimination of bad practices, the prevention of errors, the improvement of patients' health status and the proper use of available resources (Malamou, 2016; Tountas, 2003).

In the case of health services, quality is determined by specific characteristics or otherwise by specific dimensions such as appropriateness, which relates to the extent to which the health service is judged to be ideal for the health problem faced by the patient, availability, which relates to the availability of health services when the patient needs them, continuity, which relates to the provision of holistic and not fragmented health services, effectiveness which relates to the ability of health services to improve the health of the patient through the treatment and management of their illness, efficiency which relates to the use of all best practices, the respect and care that health professionals show to the patient and finally safety which relates to the knowledge that the health service is not going to cause any harm to the patient (Rikos, 2015).

According to Malamou (2016), quality in health services is divided into three sub-categories of which the first is technical quality, the second is interpersonal quality and the third is the quality of hotel infrastructure. The technical quality of health services is inextricably linked to the knowledge and skills of health professionals and to the choice of the most appropriate methods and strategies for the treatment and management of patients' health problems. Interpersonal quality is about meeting the needs of patients through the exploration of their preferences and the use of methods that are consistent with their needs and preferences. The quality of the hotel infrastructure refers to the quality of the conditions in the indoor health care facilities.

Patient Satisfaction

Due to the importance of investigating the degree of user satisfaction with the health services they receive, several studies have been conducted both in Greece and internationally. This section presents some of the research that has been carried out on the Greek reality, both in the midst of the crisis and the fiscal austerity it brought about, and before it. First, the results of those surveys conducted during the period of fiscal austerity are presented, followed by the results of surveys conducted before the onset of the economic crisis and the adoption of the corresponding fiscal measures.

One of the researches that were conducted during the period of the economic crisis is the research of Hantzopoulou et al. (2017) whose aim was to investigate the satisfaction of health service users from a tertiary hospital in Attica, following an emergency admission. 382 patients participated in the survey by completing a questionnaire used for this purpose. The results of the survey show that the majority of the patients and typically 82.5% of the sample showed that they are very satisfied with the overall health services they received and that 95.3% would recommend to someone close to them to make use of the services provided by the hospital. The factor that seems to have shaped such a high level of user satisfaction is the hospital's human resources as participants reported very high satisfaction with the attitude and behavior of doctors and nurses. On the contrary, the factor that negatively influenced the overall satisfaction of patients is none other than the waiting time, which concerns both the procedures for admission and the procedures for carrying out the necessary examinations.

Chalkidi et al. (2016) conducted a survey of relatives and caregivers of patients who had to be admitted to an Intensive Care Unit of a public sector hospital in the country. The results of the survey show that the majority of the survey participants, namely 72% of the participants were highly satisfied with the care provided to their loved ones and 80% reported high satisfaction with the decision-making process. However, the same survey found that patients' relatives and carers would like more detailed information on the health status of the patients and the provision of clear and understandable information.

One of the surveys conducted at the beginning of the economic crisis in Greece is the survey by Pini et al. (2012) as it took place during the period of December 2009. In particular, the aim of the research was to investigate the level of satisfaction of users who receive health services from the regular outpatient clinics of the E. A. N. P. Metaxas. A total of 100 health service users participated in the survey, who were asked to complete a questionnaire that investigates the degree of user satisfaction. The results of the survey are particularly encouraging as they show the high level of user satisfaction as 87% of the participants stated that they were satisfied or even completely satisfied with their experience. The factors that seem to have satisfied the users to a large extent seem to be the skills and scientific training of the doctors, the respect they show towards the patient, their willingness to discuss with the patient and inform them about their health condition as well as the cleanliness of the hospital premises. The two points that seemed not to meet patients' needs were related to the comfort of the premises and the discretion of health professionals.

Anagnostopoulou et al. (2012) tried through their research to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the health services provided by the Health Centre of Atalanti, choosing to use the evaluation of user satisfaction as an indicator. A total of 150 users of the health services provided by the health centre in question took part in the survey by completing a special questionnaire. The results of the survey show that the majority of users are satisfied as the percentage claiming moderate to high satisfaction is 90%. However, a lower degree of satisfaction was observed regarding the adequacy of doctors and the quality of hotel infrastructure as the respective satisfaction rates were 64% and 75%, respectively. Therefore, it is easy to see that there is a need to upgrade hotel equipment and increase human resources.

De Simone and Esposito (2014) conducted a primary survey of 532 health service users to investigate the level of satisfaction they receive from the services provided by a hospital in Italy. The results of the survey showed that the participants were very satisfied with the knowledge and skills of the health professionals and the relationship they developed with them. However, there was a dissatisfaction regarding the time they had to wait for the ambulance to pick them up, the communication with the ambulance workers, the cleanliness and hygiene conditions of the hospital premises. Therefore, and through this survey, it is also found that there is significant room for improvement in all dimensions of health services.

Mortsiefer et al. (2017) in their research attempted to investigate the degree of user satisfaction with the health services provided and the factors that influence the degree of patient satisfaction. Their survey involved 651 patients who used the health services provided by Germany's general medical facilities. The results are particularly encouraging as they show that the largest percentage of the participants in the survey, namely more than 80%, declared themselves satisfied or very satisfied in 22 out of 23 dimensions of health services. The dimension of health services that has the lowest level of satisfaction concerns the waiting time of users in order to receive the relevant health service.

Konstantinou and Mitropoulos (2012) tried through their research to investigate the satisfaction of users of the services of various health centres in Cyprus on the one hand and on the other hand to relate patient satisfaction to the quality of the health services provided. A total of 438 users of health services provided by 15 health centres in Cyprus participated in the survey. From the findings of the survey it was found that the majority of the survey participants,

typically 70%, were satisfied with the health services they received. It is worth mentioning that the factors that shaped user satisfaction at such high levels are mainly related to the attitude and behavior of health professionals as they claimed that they were completely satisfied with their behavior and politeness, their level of knowledge and the time they spent with them.

V. CONCLUSION

Through the findings of all the above surveys conducted in Greece and in other European countries, it is found that in general, users of health services receive high levels of satisfaction from their overall experience without, however, implying that there is no room for further improvement. In particular, it is evident that in most cases patients are highly satisfied with the attitude, behavior and knowledge of health professionals and less satisfied with the time between the desire to receive the health service and the actual time of receiving it. In essence, these findings show that in all European countries it is necessary to make an effort to improve the quality of health services in a systematic way in order to address the various problems and to increase user satisfaction with their experience.

In the field of healthcare, patient satisfaction has emerged as an important indicator of the quality of care and has been used as a means to achieve, maintain and monitor it. Despite the widespread acceptance of the term, there are several differences in the interpretation given by health care providers and users. Health professionals tend to focus on professional standards and pursue quality primarily in terms of effectiveness. Patients, in turn, associate quality with clinical outcomes, communication skills, and attitudes of understanding by health professionals. Management, finally, interprets quality with indicators of efficiency, patient satisfaction, accessibility and continuous improvement of services. However, the evaluation of the quality of care, which was traditionally based on the application of professional standards, increasingly integrates patients' perceptions into the measurements.

The process and the means of providing health care to the citizens are determined by the wider social, economic, political and cultural environment and of course by the social inequalities that are reproduced in it. With the significant assistance of the sciences of planning and organization, healthcare services form a complex system, the form of which varies based on political choices, social processes and the historical-cultural context that surrounds it. Healthcare systems are complex and ever-changing entities.

However, despite the research that has already been carried out on the quality of health services and patient satisfaction in the public health system, it is a subject of research that will continue to occupy researchers over time, due to the changing conditions in health care facilities, both at the economic and health care level, over the years.

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