

PATIENTS KNOWLEDGE OF THEIR RIGHTS UNDER CONSUMER PROTECTION ACT IN PRIVATE HOSPITAL AT COIMBATORE CITY

- **Dr. V. Ravi Kumar, M. Com, MBA, M. Phil., PhD., Principal, CMS Institute of management Studies, Coimbatore**
- **Ms. Nisha Malini, Assistant Professor, Department of MBA, Karunya Institute of Technology and Science, Coimbatore**

Abstract

Background: *Active participation of patients' in their own care is known to increase motivation and observance to prescriptions, give better treatment results, create greater satisfaction with received care, increases medical literacy, gives autonomy in decisions made and reduce stress and anxiety. Knowledge of what may influence patients' participation is thus of great importance when it comes to meeting their expectations and demands. Although the Consumer protection Act empowers patients to demand quality care, still complaints against medical professionals for errors, inequitable access and less satisfaction in medical service delivered remains.*

Aim: *The study aimed to assess the level of awareness of patients' rights safe guarded under Consumer Protection Act amongst patients at private hospitals in Coimbatore city.*

Methods: *A questionnaire based survey conducted among patients using qualitative and quantitative data collection methods.*

Results: *Result of the study on patient's awareness of consumer rights in table 10 shows that patients have a moderate feel on right to information, right to consumer education and right to choose and Patients disagree with the right to safety, right to be heard and with right to redressal.*

Keywords: *COPRA, Patients' Rights, Private Hospital*
Abbreviations: *COPRA – Consumer Protection Act in India*

1.1. Introduction

People's health is an important factor in measuring social and economic well-being. The United Nation's (UN) Universal Declaration of Human Rights includes health care as a right. Protecting consumer rights is integral to social justice, respect for human rights, fair and effective market economies, and protection of the environment. Broadly, consumer policy refers to the action taken to meet the fundamental rights of consumers. It is the duty of the Indian government to provide the fundamental right to life and personal liberty guaranteed by Article 21 of the Constitution. Therefore, it is the duty of the state to provide to all citizens adequate and proper medical services. Patients' rights being fundamental human rights, gives quality assurance measure that promotes ethical practices.

Today, concerns about the patients choice, respect for their values and preferences and access to health care are becoming more complex. Patients expectations are higher and they want the best. They want to actively participate in decision-making. Knowledge of what may influence patients' participation is thus of great importance when it comes to meeting their expectations and demands. Many countries have guaranteed patients' rights to process for resolving dissatisfactions with health care providers. In India, patients' rights are guaranteed under the Consumer Protection Act.

1.2. Consumer Protection Act – Indian Scenario

In India, the Consumer Protection Act, 1986 was enacted 'to provide for better protection of the interests of the consumers'– the consumers of goods and services as defined under the Act. Although the Consumer protection Act empowers patients to demand quality care, still complaints against medical professionals for errors, inequitable access and less satisfaction in medical service delivered remains. A patient who pays up for the treatment, or promises to do so with a consideration can seek redressal under this act. Hence, patients of private nursing homes, hospitals and private practitioners comes under the ambit of a Consumer Protection Act.

1.3. Rights of the consumer safeguarded through COPRA

- Right to be informed about the quantity, quality, purity, standard, potency, standard and price of goods and services so as to be protected from unfair trade practices;
- Right to choice wherever possible to access to variety of goods and services at competitive price;
- Right to safety against marketing of goods and services which are dangerous to life and property;
- Right to be heard and to be assured that consumer interest will be heard at the appropriate redressal mechanism;
- Right to seek redressal against unfair trade practices or restrictive trade practices or devious exploitation of consumers and
- Right to consumer education.

COPRA has been of immense help to all consumers of goods and services after it came into force in 1986. This is because the consumers can seek redress from the consumer forums in an economical, speedy and just manner. Medical services also come under the purview of service in the broader sense as formulated under the Act.

1.4. Knowledge towards Consumer Rights under Consumer Protection Act

Adherence to patient rights considered an important issue in the quality improvement efforts in health services, and one of the main bases for defining standards of medical services. For patients to be aware of their own rights, not only can increase the patients' dignity by enabling them to participate with doctors in decision-making responsibilities, but also can increase the quality of health care services, reduce costs and decrease the length of hospital stays. It has been shown that raising awareness on the patient's condition improves patient cooperation with health care practitioners, and enables them to play a more active role in their own health and also guides the patient

towards realistic expectations from the health care team. This implies that raising patient awareness has a positive influence on patient care. It is hoped that the results of this study will guide policy towards raising patients' awareness on their medical conditions in private hospitals in order to improve the quality of patient health care.

1.5. Aim of the Study

The study aimed to assess level of patients' knowledge of their rights guaranteed under Consumer Protection Act, in Private hospitals in Coimbatore. Awareness of patients from their rights can bring about a lot of advantages such as increased quality of health care services, decreased costs, more prompt recovery, decreased length of stay in hospitals, lower risk of irreversible physical and spiritual damages, and more importantly, increased dignity of patients through informing them about their rights to participate in decision making. On the other hand, lack of respect to patients' rights may lead to hazards to security and health situation of patients. Besides, it may ruin the relationship between the staff and patients that consequently decreases efficiency, effectiveness, and suitable care of patients. Hence, the study identified the patients' awareness their rights in private hospitals at Coimbatore city.

1.6. Need For the Study

The landmark judgement of the Honourable Supreme Court of India in Indian Medical Association against V. P. Shantha 1996 for the first time held that medical service is included under the purview of Consumer Protection Act 1986 and patients are consumers when they make use of medical service. Patients' rights are fundamental human rights, a quality assurance measure that protects patients against abuse and discrimination and promotes ethical practices. Hence, it is important to empower patients' of their rights as consumer of medical service in order for patients to responsibly demand for quality health care and give patient the autonomy to participate in decision making, privacy, confidentiality while seeking medical service.

This study offers opportunities for identifying strategies whereby policy, legislative and programmatic developments can be conducted to strengthen patients of

their awareness of their rights and a system to practice patients' rights by patients' and health care staff so as to improve health outcomes thereby reducing the number of complaints by patients against medical professionals.

1.7. Statement of The Problem

No man is perfect in this world and a medical professional skilled with abundant knowledge over a particular subject can make mistakes during their medical practice, which may lead to minor injuries or sometimes even to death. Dr K K Karla, Chief Executive Officer of National Accreditation Board for Hospitals and Healthcare Providers said, despite massive growth in Indian healthcare industry, an alarming 98,000 patients die every year due to medical errors in the country. A Harvard study by Prof Jha shows that 5.2 million medical errors are happening in India annually. Similarly, the British Medical Journal quoted that India like any other developing country is recording lot of medical errors.

Major reason is, many patients find that they are not treated with due consideration, compassion, and have no role in decision making over their own health care due to lack of information or are not heard by the doctors or have no choice over the medical treatment given to them. This has led to an increase of attacks on doctors or hospitals countrywide. The nation is experiencing a rift in the doctor – patient relationship. The main reason being an increasing gap between the patients' rights as consumers guaranteed under Consumer Protection Act and awareness of patients' rights by patients. In addition, there exist a gap between patient expectations and delivery of medical care.

Having identified the research gap the researcher will research whether patients' are aware of their rights guaranteed under Consumer Protection Act when consuming medical service. The study conducted among patients of private hospitals in Coimbatore district. In this study, knowledge refers to the patients' awareness of their rights guaranteed under Consumer Protection Act.

1.8. Objectives of the Study

- The study aimed at assessing the level of awareness of patients' rights among patients of private hospital at Coimbatore city.
- To provide suitable suggestion if necessary.

1.9. Research Methodology

The research design used in this study is Qualitative Research as it describes clearly the characteristics of the sample as expressed by the respondents. Based on the review of literatures, a questionnaire was constructed to collect data regarding the factors relating to the patients awareness of their rights guaranteed under Consumer Protection Act. The Pilot study was conducted in the various private hospitals in Coimbatore city. The Pilot study revealed that the tool has adequate stimulus value to gather authentic responses from respondents. The population of the study comprises of patients of private hospitals in Coimbatore city. The sample size selected for the study among the patients in various private hospitals. The respondents are selected from the above private hospitals through random sampling. The data was collected by interview schedule using structured questionnaire. For analyzing the data various statistical tools like frequency distribution, mean and standard deviation used to find result of the study.

This research was a descriptive questionnaire survey on patient's awareness of their rights in private hospital in Coimbatore city. Data gathering tool was a questionnaire, categorized in 2 parts; the first part contained the demographic and health care information including gender, age, educational level, place of residency and knowledge of hospital, type of visit, period of taking treatment etc. The second part included the 6 rights of the Consumer Protection Act. Awareness of patients of their rights was measured using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly don't have knowledge) to 5 (Strongly have knowledge). A total of 789 patients were surveyed, after informing them of the study objectives. The data was analyzed using SPSS 15. Descriptive statistics used including frequency, average and standard deviation to achieve the research objectives.

1.10. Analysis and Interpretation

This section of the research focuses on analyzing responses to the questions addressed in the questionnaire that are intended to measure the socio-economic and patients awareness of their rights guaranteed under Consumer Protection Act and its impact on the outcome of the medical care. The present chapter is based on the analysis and interpretation of data. The data may be reliable and valid but it does not serve the purpose unless the data is carefully classified, processed, analyzed, interpreted and concluded. This part consists of three dimensions of analysis with Percentage Analysis, Mean and Standard Deviations.

FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION (PERCENTAGE ANALYSIS)

Table 1: Gender Wise Classification of the Respondents

Measuring Labels	Frequency	Percent
Male	514	65.1
Female	275	34.9
Total	789	100.0
<i>* Source – Primary Data</i>		

From the above table it can be inferred that majority of the respondents were male contributing to 65% of the study.

Table 2: Age Wise Classification of the Respondents

Measuring Labels	Frequency	Percent
18 Years - 28 Years	36	4.6
28 Years - 38 Years	118	15.0
38 Years - 48 Years	554	70.2
48 Years - 58 Years	81	10.3
Total	789	100.0
<i>* Source – Primary Data</i>		

From the above table inferred that 70% of respondents belong to the age group of 38 to 48 years, 15% belong to 28 to 38 years, 10% belong to 48 to 58 years and remaining 5% belong to 18 to 28 years.

Table 3: Marital Status Wise Classification of the Respondents

Measuring Labels	Frequency	Percent
Married	540	68.4
Unmarried	249	31.6
Total	789	100.0
<i>* Source – Primary Data</i>		

From the above table inferred that 68% of the respondents were married and 32% were unmarried.

Table 4: Know about this Hospital Wise Classification of the Respondents

Measuring Labels	Frequency	Percent
Friends & Relatives	133	16.9
Business References	106	13.4
Media	218	27.6
Employer References	190	24.1
Internet	142	18.0
Total	789	100.0
<i>* Source – Primary Data</i>		

From the above table inferred that 28 % of the respondents came to know the hospital visited through media, 24 % by employer reference, 18% through internet, 17% through friends and relatives, 17% and 13% through business references.

Table 5: Use Medical Service of this Hospital Wise Classification of the Respondents

Measuring Labels	Frequency	Percent
Daily	313	39.7
Weekly	452	57.3
Fortnightly	16	2.0
Monthly	8	1.0
Total	789	100.0
<i>* Source – Primary Data</i>		

From the above table inferred that 57 % of the respondents visit the hospital weekly, 40% daily, 2% fortnightly and 1% monthly.

Table 6: Type of Visit Wise Classification of the Respondents

Measuring Labels	Frequency	Percent
In Patient	424	53.7
Out Patient	365	46.3
Total	789	100.0
<i>* Source – Primary Data</i>		

From the above table inferred that 53 % of the respondents are inpatients and 46% are outpatients.

Table 7: Period of Taking Treatment in this Hospital Wise Classification of the Respondents

Measuring Labels	Frequency	Percent
Less than 1 Year	83	10.5
1 Year to 2 Years	70	8.9
2 Years to 3 Years	104	13.2
3 Years to 4 Years	180	22.8
4 Years to 5 Years	127	16.1
5 Years to 6 Years	173	21.9
Above 6 Years	52	6.6
Total	789	100.0
<i>* Source – Primary Data</i>		

From the above table inferred that 23 % of the respondents are taking treatment in their hospital for 3 to 4 years, 22% for 5 to 6 years, 16% for 4 to 5 years, 13% for 2 to 3 years 9% for 1 to 2 years and 7 % for more than 6 years.

Table 8: Patient Visit Status Wise Classification of the Respondents

Measuring Labels	Frequency	Percent
New Patient	501	63.5
Revisit Patient	288	36.5
Total	789	100.0
<i>* Source – Primary Data</i>		

From the above table inferred that 64 % of the respondents are new patients and 37% revisit patients in their hospital.

Table 9: Physician Spent Time to Discuss your Medical Problem for First Time Wise Classification of the Respondents

Measuring Labels	Frequency	Percent
Less than 5 Minutes	96	12.2
5 Minutes to 10 Minutes	80	10.1
10 Minutes to 20 Minutes	112	14.2
20 Minutes to 30 Minutes	200	25.3
More than an hour	136	17.2
Can't remember	165	20.9
Total	789	100.0
<i>* Source – Primary Data</i>		

From the above table inferred that 25 % of the respondents opinion that physicians spent 20 to 30 minutes to discuss medical problem, 21% can't remember, 17% more than an hour, 14% 10 to 20 minutes and 10% 5 to 10 minutes.

Table 10: Overall Patients Awareness of their Rights under COPRA

Measuring Variables	N	Mean	Sd
Patients Awareness - Right to Information	789	2.22	.417
Patients Awareness - Right to Choose	789	2.00	.142
Patients Awareness - Right to Safety	789	1.94	.239
Patients Awareness - Right to be Heard	789	1.23	.422
Patients Awareness - Right to Redressal	789	1.16	.368
Patients Awareness - Right to Consumer Education	789	2.03	.265
Mean Score	789	1.96	.197
<i>* Source – Primary Data</i>			

From the above table it is clear that the respondents have a moderate feel on right to information (2.22) then followed by right to consumer education (2.03) then right to choose (2.00). The respondents disagree with the variable right to safety (1.94) followed by right to be heard (1.23) and then with right to redressal (1.16).

1.11. Suggestions

This study has demonstrated that the proportions of patients that reported awareness varied. The proportions of patients that reported awareness of some aspects of care were moderate (information, consumer education and choose) and poor in case of rights to safety, to be heard and redressal. Raising awareness of patients' rights should be

part of every health care practitioner-patient encounter. Awareness of and access to patients' rights and related information, including the Consumer Protection Act, remain limited and remote for patients seeking care private Hospital. There is a need to strengthen the existing patients' rights awareness strategies through policies that promote a patients' rights-based care approach at the points of care. There is a need for the integration of social services in patient care to create awareness of rights amongst patients. National awareness campaigns on patient rights that adopt a multilevel, multichannel approach to increase awareness amongst patients are urgent.

1.12. Conclusion

Majority of the respondents were male contributing to 65 % of the study and 70% of respondents belong to the age group of 38 to 48 years and 68% of the respondents were married. Regarding health care details result showed that 28 % of the respondents came to know the private hospital visited through media, 57 % of the respondents visit the hospital weekly, 53 % of the respondents are inpatients and 46% are outpatients, 23 % of the respondents are taking treatment in their hospital for 3 to 4 years, 64 % of the respondents are new patients and 25 % of the respondents opinion that physicians spent 20 to 30 minutes to discuss medical problem. Result of the study on patient's awareness of consumer rights in table 10 shows that patients have a moderate feel on right to information, right to consumer education and right to choose and Patients disagree with the right to safety, right to be heard and with right to redressal.

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