

ORIGINAL ARTICLE**HOSPITALIZED PATIENTS' AWARENESS OF THEIR RIGHTS-A CROSS SECTIONAL SURVEY IN A PUBLIC AND PRIVATE TERTIARY CARE HOSPITALS OF PUNJAB, PAKISTAN****Tahirah Tabassum, Mariam Ashraf*, Inayat Thaver****

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Background: The awareness of patient's rights is negligible in developing countries where no legal framework is present to protect these rights and Pakistan is no exception. Not only is there an absence of legal structure for protection of patients' rights, but the enforcement and implementation for existing law is also questionable. Pakistan has an Islamic Charter of Medical and Health Ethics which includes the medical behaviour and physician's rights and duties towards the patients. Despite all these charters on patients' rights, there is little to no awareness regarding these rights and their practice remains low in healthcare system of Pakistan. This assessment of awareness among patients about their rights will guide in formulating recommendations to improve the existing system of healthcare delivery in the country. **Methods:** This descriptive cross-sectional comparative study was conducted in two hospitals in Lahore, each belonging to public and private sector. A structured questionnaire was used to collect data from patients. A total of 220 patients were selected to participate in the study, 110 belonging to each private and public hospital. **Results:** The findings indicate that most of the patients (64%) were not aware of their rights. The awareness level was better in patients seeking care from private hospital than those from public hospital. Education, monthly income and type of hospital utilized were found to be positively associated with the level of awareness. Most of the patients were not satisfied with the practices of their rights, especially in public hospitals. **Conclusion:** The lack of awareness regarding the rights of a patient was more common in patients of public/government hospitals compared to private hospitals. A nation-wide healthcare education program is needed to increase awareness and practice of patients' rights in the country.

Keywords: Patients' rights; Patients' care; awareness of patients' rights in hospitals

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INTRODUCTION

Health is a fundamental human right recognized in the World Health Organization's Constitution stating that "the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the fundamental rights of every human being without distinction of race, religion, political belief and economic or social condition".¹ In 2004, World Alliance for patients' safety was established by WHO to spread awareness and empower people around the world to secure their rights as a patient when the need comes.²

Patients' rights have become an important part of modern health care practice. During the last fifteen years, an increasing number of European countries have adopted laws or other legal instruments respecting and protecting the rights of patients as consumers. Patients' rights vary in different countries and in different jurisdictions, often depending upon prevailing cultural and social norms.³

According to Consumers' Rights Commission of Pakistan (CRC), the lack of enforceable rights of citizens as consumers is one of the major contributing factors to various crises in

Pakistan, ranging from governance to corporate activities.⁴ The importance of knowledge of patients and healthcare professionals regarding the rights of patients has been identified in a number of studies.⁵⁻⁷ Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (PMDC), the regulatory body of medical practitioners has formulated a code of ethics for all doctors, where patients' rights are discussed in a brief.⁸ It has been found that education and training of professionals regarding the patients' rights is crucial to ensure practice of these rights.⁷ Some of the basic patients' rights include the right to medical care of good quality, right to information, right to confidentiality, respect of their religious and cultural beliefs, right to complaint and right to assess their medical record. However, knowledge of patients' rights may not be enough in itself to ensure practice. Medical students are also not given adequate education regarding patients' rights as the topic is often overlooked.⁹

Studies have shown that knowledge related to patient's rights is negligible among the patients. In Turkey, only 9% of the patients are aware of their rights while extensive education is needed for the remaining 91%.¹⁰ A similar study was conducted in

Saudi Arabia and it was found that almost 75% of the patients were completely unaware of their rights.¹¹ This lack of awareness does not only result in violation of patients' rights, but also promotes an overall trend of disrespect for the patient. It has been found that low level of awareness of patients' rights is positively correlated with low respect for patients' rights.⁷ It has also been observed that people who belong to the upper socio-economic strata and those who have higher education are more likely to be aware of patients' rights as a healthcare consumer.¹²

Though there is a bulk of international literature on the subject matter, there is gap in literature with reference to Pakistan. The present research attempts to fill this gap and provide a broad scope for policy and health protection reforms in delivering better health services to citizens of Pakistan. The key objective of the study is to determine and compare the knowledge of patients regarding their rights in seeking healthcare services in a public and private hospital of Lahore, Pakistan. This assessment of the lack of awareness of patients' rights among patients will hopefully guide in formulating recommendations for improving the health care delivery system.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This cross sectional descriptive study was carried out from June to September 2013 in two tertiary care hospitals, one from private sector and second from public sector in Lahore, Pakistan. A part of this research also included Doctors knowledge regarding patients' rights but is not described here. Sample size was estimated using formula of difference between two proportions and considering the prevalence of patients' knowledge regarding their rights to be 50% a sample of 220 patients was derived. Through systematic random sampling 110 inpatients of medicine and surgery departments of the respective hospitals were selected.

A self-administered structured questionnaire was adapted from a previous study¹¹ carried out on awareness regarding patients' rights. The rights as described in Pakistan Medical and Dental Council code of ethics were also added.⁸ The questionnaire was finalised in English and was translated in Urdu for easy understanding of the respondents. This questionnaire was then pretested over 15 patients to detect any required changes, omissions, additions, problems and the time estimation for each interview.

The pretesting enabled the researcher to finalize the questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of three parts; first part was pertinent to patient's demographic characteristics while the second part was regarding the awareness of patient's rights such as privacy and confidentiality. The third part was pertinent to future recommendations and barriers towards low

level of awareness. Questions required a yes and a no with few open ended questions.

Consent and convenience of the respondents was given due consideration. Selection criteria included patients who had stayed for a minimum duration of 3 days while those patients who were in serious medical condition were not part of the study. The ethical approval for this study was obtained from ethical committee, National Defence University, Islamabad. Permission of the concerned authorities of hospitals was also obtained through a letter from National Defence University explaining the purpose of the study. The data was analysed in SPSS version 17. Analysis was done to generate descriptive and inferential statistics. Results were derived in terms of frequencies and percentages; furthermore Pearson Chi-square was applied to check for association.

RESULTS

The socio demographic characteristics indicate that more than half (57%) of the patients were local residents of Lahore while the remaining belonged to nearby areas including Kasur, Sheikhupura and Sahiwal. The mean age of the patients was found to be 40.74 ± 16.85 years. Males comprised 60% of the participants, as compared to 40% of females. The participants from public hospital were less educated as 38% had no formal education, while 13% of participants seeking care from private hospital had no formal education.

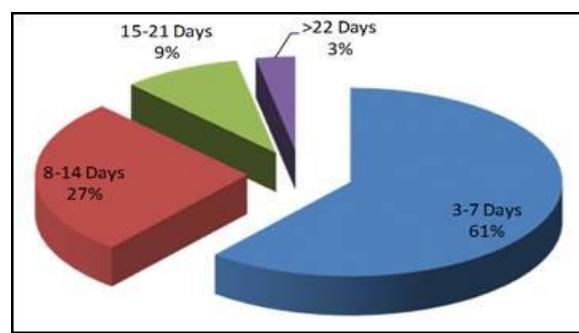


Table-1 Figure-1: Duration of stay of the patients in the hospital

Based on the monthly income, majority of the patients who were admitted in government hospital belonged to middle and low socio economic group and the patients who were admitted in private hospital belonged to upper middle/high class. (Table-1)

All the patients who were selected were admitted with minimum duration of 3 days. Majority of the patients 61% had stayed for 3–7days while 3% stayed for a maximum duration of 40 days.

The study findings indicate that the level of awareness of patients' rights among participants was generally low. Only 36% of the patients were aware of their rights of

which 26% of patients belong to public hospital and 45% of patients were from private hospital. (Table-2). Individual questions were asked pertinent to different rights. It was found that majority of the participants were not able to completely comprehend all of their rights. Most of the patients 78% were not aware that keeping the patient fully informed about the diagnosis and treatment plan is an important patient right. Similarly, 76% were not aware that respecting patient's belief and filing a complaint against the medical provider is a right of the patient. (Table-3)

When asked about whether they are satisfied with the current practice of rights in the hospital only 41% of the patients were satisfied while majority 59% were not satisfied. Further analysing it according to the type of hospital 65% from public hospital and 52% from private hospital were not satisfied with the current practice of their rights in the corresponding hospitals. Table-4) An association was found between hospital type and awareness of patients' rights, participants utilizing private hospital had better knowledge of patient's rights (p -value 0.002) than those utilizing public hospital. Similarly an association was found between education level and awareness of patient's rights with a p -value of 0.000; those patients who were more educated had better knowledge of their rights. (Table-5)

Lack of awareness and knowledge was cited by 46% of the patients as the major barrier for being aware of patient's rights. Twenty-six percent described illiteracy as a major hindrance in the awareness of the rights of patients and 5% of the patients described lack of government effective policy as a main cause in this regard. Healthcare education (33%), awareness through media (24%) and effective healthcare policy (14%) were highly suggested recommendations by the participants to increase the knowledge as well as practice of rights of the patients in the hospitals.

Table-1: Socio demographic characteristics of the participants (n=220)

Gender	Government	Private	Total
	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)
Male	70 (64)	61 (56)	131 (60)
Female	40 (36)	49 (44)	89 (40)
Education level			
Uneducated	42 (38)	14 (13)	56 (25)
Primary	14 (13)	10 (9)	24 (11)
Middle	18 (16)	11 (10)	29 (13)
Matric	18 (16)	25 (23)	43 (20)
Intermediate	14 (13)	17 (16)	31 (14)
Graduation >	4 (4)	33 (30)	37 (17)
Income level			
<20000	97 (88)	6 (5)	103 (47)
21000-40000	11 (10)	26 (24)	37 (17)
41000-60000	0 (0)	30 (27)	30 (14)
61000-100000	2 (2)	33 (30)	35 (16)
>110000	0 (0)	15 (14)	15 (7)

Table-2: Awareness of patients regarding their rights according to the type of hospital (n=220)

Type of Hospital	Aware	Not aware
	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)
Government hospital	29 (26)	81 (74)
Private hospital	50 (45)	60 (55)
Total	79 (36)	141 (64)

Table 3: Patients awareness regarding their rights

No	Patients' rights include following	Aware Frequency (%)	Not Aware Frequency (%)
1	To receive respectful care	77 (35)	143 (65)
2	To be cared for by qualified competent staff and to be seen by specialist.	72 (33)	148 (67)
3	To be kept fully informed of diagnosis and treatment plan.	48 (22)	172 (78)
4	To receive all necessary information to allow informed consent to be given for all medical interventions.	75 (34)	145 (66)
5	To be informed of the effects on patient health if patient refuse treatment	75 (34)	145 (66)
6	Provision of information regarding treatment in an understandable language	76 (35)	144 (65)
7	To be assured of privacy and confidentiality with regard to medical and social information.	75 (34)	145 (66)
8	To be discharged as recommended by the doctor with appropriate medications, follow up appointment and required information.	77 (35)	143 (65)
9	To be provided with a medical report summarizing patients' medical condition and course during admission	61 (28)	159 (72)
10	To seek a second opinion from another doctor.	75 (34)	145 (66)
11	To be informed of duration of treatment	66 (30)	154 (70)
12	To provide access to nurse/doctor	73 (33)	147 (67)
13	To respect the patients' beliefs	53 (24)	167 (76)
14	To receive care in a clean and medically safe environment	75 (34)	145 (66)
15	To file a complaint regarding your medical provider or facility without fear of reprisals.	53 (24)	167 (76)

Table-4: Satisfied with the current practices of Patient's rights in the hospital (n=220)

Domains	Satisfied Frequency (%)	Not satisfied Frequency (%)
Government Hospital	38 (35)	72 (65)
Private Hospital	53 (48)	57 (52)
Total	91(41)	129 (59)

Table-5: Association between awareness of rights and type of hospital and patients' education

Domains	Patient's rights Awareness		p-value
	Yes	No	
Type of Hospital	Frequency (%)	Frequency (%)	
Government	29 (37)	81 (57)	0.002
Private	50 (63)	60 (43)	
Education			
Un educated	2 (3)	54 (38)	0.000
Primary	2 (2)	22 (16)	
Middle	9 (11)	20 (14)	
Matric	16 (20)	27 (19)	
Intermediate	25 (32)	6 (4)	
Graduation and above	25 (32)	12 (8)	

DISCUSSION

The awareness of patient's right is a topic that needs further research and discussion. On the basis of human and moral rights we should take every step to help patients to receive optimal care. By improving knowledge of the patients regarding their rights will definitely improve practice of patients' right in hospitals. The findings of this study suggest that 64 percent of patients were unaware of their rights. This finding is similar to previous studies carried out in Turkey which showed that only 9% of patients were aware of the regulation about patients' rights.¹³ Furthermore another study carried out in Saudi Arabia to determine the level of awareness of hospitalized patients about their rights indicated that only 25% of patients were aware of the bill of patients' rights.¹¹ Study conducted in Hamedan hospital that assessed the respect of rights of patients in term of hospitalized clients, found that 56% of people were not familiar with the charter of patient rights and also indicated lower level of awareness regarding their rights.¹⁴ Multiple factors are found to be linked with this low level of awareness about patient's rights, most common being low level of education; in this study 49 percent of patients had education below matric level (Grade 10). Results of current study showed no significant relationship between age, and gender with awareness of patients. This situation for educational level and the type of hospital was different. Patients from private hospital had higher awareness about their rights than patients from public hospital. Given the fact that knowledge can improve the awareness of people about their rights, media plays a pivotal role in informing public of their rights especially patient's rights. These findings are confirmed by another study carried out in Iran¹⁵ where education was found to be associated with the level of awareness of patients' rights. Another factor recognized to affect awareness level was socioeconomic status. Level of awareness was found to be more in patients visiting private as compared to patients in government hospitals because of high level of education and socioeconomic status. Practice and satisfaction about patients' rights is observed in only 41 percent of patients and among those majority of patients belong to private hospitals. By improving health care education among patients will definitely improve awareness and practice of patients' right in hospitals. Implementation of patients' rights in hospital by health providers can enhance patient's satisfaction and can also improve the health utilization rates as well.

One of the limitations of this study was that the study sample was taken from two hospitals,

which raises the question of generalizability of results to other public and private hospitals. Also the condition of the patient may affect the responses regarding their satisfaction of practicing rights.

CONCLUSION

The review of the literature and findings of the present study shows that the overall level of awareness of patients regarding their rights was significantly low. Education and interventions to increase awareness among the masses is needed in order to improve the awareness as well as the practice of patients' rights in the hospitals.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

TT: Principal Author, literature review, data collection, analysis, draft results. MA: Literature review, data Analysis, finalization of results and review. IT: Overall supervision and technical feedback on the research, quality check, review and final approval.

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