

Question of 'patients' versus 'clients'

MICHAEL J RAMDASS,^{1*} MBBS, VIJAY NARAYNSINGH,¹ FRCS, FACS,
DALE MAHARAJ,² FRCS, KEITH BADLOO,¹
SURUJPAUL TEELUCKSINGH,¹ MRCP, ANDREW PERRY¹ MBBS

¹*Department of Surgery, University of the West Indies, General Hospital, Port-of, Spain, Trinidad, West Indies (Email: jramdass@tstt.net.tt)*, ²*Institute for Vascular Health and Disease, Albany Medical Center, Albany, NY, USA*

Abstract Our study showed that of the 300 consecutive people interviewed at the General Hospital at Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, most persons (80%) preferred to be called 'patients' as opposed to 7% choosing the term 'client' and 6% opting for the term 'customer'. This proves our hypothesis that in the developing world people prefer to maintain the doctor-patient relationship and leave the word 'client' and 'customer' for the businessman.

Key words: client; customer; health-care worker-patient relationship; patient; Trinidad.

INTRODUCTION

The term 'patient', derived from the Latin word 'pati', meaning to suffer, has been used for centuries. However, over the past few decades, emerging health systems have shown significant changes worldwide with the introduction of regional health authorities and the placement of business administrators to manage health systems and make them economically efficient.¹ The terms 'client' and 'customer' have now been introduced to replace the term 'patient', probably to remove the perception of the health-care worker-patient relationship as one of power and dependency.⁵ The aim of this study is to determine if people seeking medical care prefer to be referred to as patients, clients or customers.

METHODS AND RESULTS

Over a two-day period 300 consecutive people were interviewed at the General Hospital, Port-of-Spain. Persons seeking medical care admitted to hospital on the medical, surgical, gynaecological, orthopaedic wards, as well as the surgical and medical outpatient clinics and those attending the accident and emergency department were asked to participate in the study.

A questionnaire was given to them explaining that there are ongoing discussions taking place about the term hospital staff should use to refer to persons seeking medical attention. Subjects were asked their preference between the terms 'patient', 'client', 'customer' or 'other name'.

To avoid selection bias for the first option, the first 100 questionnaires were designed with the word

'patient' first, the next 100 with 'client' first and the last 100 with 'customer' first.

The consensus revealed the following: 80% of persons preferred the term 'patients', 7% as 'client' 6% as 'customer' and 7% chose 'other name'. One person (< 1%) refused to answer.

There were 139 (46%) females and 161 (54%) males with an age range of 13–91 years and age distribution as follows: 21.7%, < 31 years old; 22.7%, 31–40 years old; 15.7%, 41–50 years old; 17.3%, 51–60 years old; 12%, 61–70 years old; and 10.6%, > 70 years old. Ethnic distribution was predominantly African (159; 53%) and East Indian (93; 31%) descent with a minority of persons of mixed (46; 15.3%), Chinese and Caucasian (< 1%) descent.

DISCUSSION

The term 'patient' has been used for centuries to describe persons seeking medical attention and is derived from the Latin term 'pati', 'to suffer'. The definition is one who is under medical treatment.³ Another definition is a person who undergoes, suffers or endures a problem with respect to which health professionals can provide preventative, curative, comforting, caring and diagnostic interventions.⁴

A 'client' is one who is under the protection or patronage of another or one who employs the services of a legal advisor.³ A 'customer' is one who customarily purchases anywhere.³

Our survey found that of the 300 persons attending the hospital for medical care, most persons (80%) preferred the term 'patients' and only a minority preferred the terms 'client' (6%) and 'customer' (7%).

It is quite clear from these results that the terms 'client' and 'customer', which administrations

*Correspondence address: Dr Michael J. Ramdass, 100 East Drive, Champs Fleurs, St. Joseph, Trinidad, West Indies.

governing hospitals and health systems have introduced^{1,5} is not the 'patient' preference.

One needs to remember that the doctor–patient relationship is not one of a purely business agreement, but rather a sensitive issue built on mutual trust and respect, as patients are the people doctors listen to, examine and help at a much more personal level than a businessman–customer relationship.

The use of a new name to label those who seek medical care has been controversial. It has been argued that calling people 'patients' makes them more ill or denies their rights.⁶ However, the special ingredients of care essential to the healing process are in no way conveyed by the terms 'client' or 'customer'.²

The evolving medical consumerism unfortunately is attempting, intentionally or not, to change the public perception of the 'doctor' from a caregiver to an entrepreneur.

In the developing world people tend to be less well-educated and the populations seeking medical attention have a more 'rural' background and prefer the doctor–patient relationship. This is well reflected in our results of 80% preferring the term patients. We feel that researchers in other parts of the globe should embark

on similar studies to obtain an objective viewpoint on people's thoughts in urban societies, as very little work has been done as reflected in the medical reviews.

Furthermore, as doctors, we feel it is insensitive to refer to the 'sick' and ailing as 'clients' and 'customers' and suggest that the necessary adjustments be made to correct this undermining of the doctor–patient relationship. The day we start calling patients clients, what will doctors call themselves?

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