

QI/PS Hot Topic – November 2022

Informing healthcare quality through patient focus groups

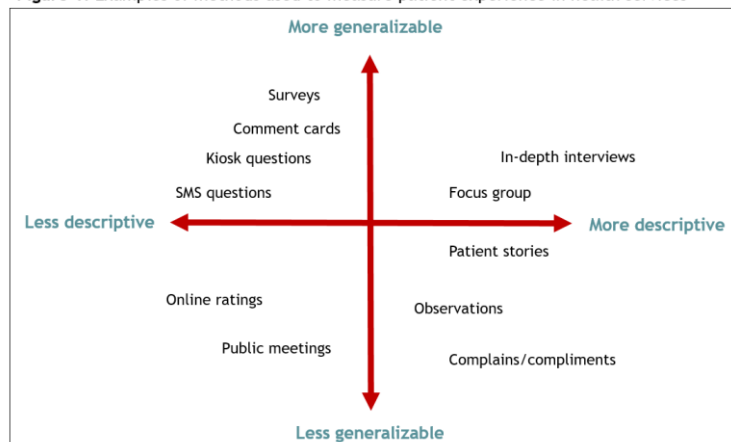
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Learning Objectives:

1. Discuss the utility of patient focus groups in quality improvement
2. Describe how to plan and conduct a patient focus group
3. Identify ways to analyze and visualize qualitative data

Focus groups are a form of qualitative research used to gain a deeper understanding of experience, opinions, behaviors and needs of the customer through a moderated, open discussion. In a healthcare setting it is important that patients can provide feedback about their experience in order to continually improve care. There are several ways to collect patient experience data, and as depicted in Figure 1. These methods vary in description and generalizability. To understand patient experience within a large healthcare system, the focus is often on collecting and reporting quantitative (or “countable”) data because it can be easily organized, analyzed and understood. Quantitative information is more generalizable to the broader population, but less descriptive about individual patients.

Figure 1: Examples of methods used to measure patient experience in health services⁵



These approaches are categorized according to the depth of information they provide and the extent to which they collect information that may be generalizable to a wider population. It may be beneficial to combine approaches.

An effective method for collecting descriptive patient stories is through a focus group – a guided discussion about a particular topic. A group discussion with patients is a great way to delve into detail on specific topics, to understand participant’s opinions and to encourage new thoughts and ideas. Further, it gives patients an opportunity to play a role in positive change within the health system.

There are limitations to focus groups. They require a significant amount of time to organize and execute, the data can be complex to analyze and there is a potential for bias. Despite these challenges, it is still an effective tool for sampling a subset of a population about targeted topics. Below are guidelines and tips for planning and conducting an effective focus group.

How to **plan** for a patient focus group:

- Define the objective of the focus group. What research question needs to be informed?
- Determine the session details including date(s), location and length (1 hour is recommended). An incentive can be offered to participants to encourage participation and as a thank you for their involvement.
- Prepare a list of 8-12 open-ended questions to guide the discussion that align with the session objectives. The most important questions should be asked first to ensure they aren’t missed. An ice breaker question can be posed at the beginning to encourage conversation.

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