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The Need for Public Relations Officers/Departments in Hospitals: A Case Study of Hospitals in Kampala Capital City Authority

Hospital clientele, today, is aware of its rights and the expectations are rising. As consumers, the society has absolute and inalienable right to demand better services. A feeling is growing among the masses that hospitals are not functioning properly as evident from an increasing number of patient complaints. The press and public opinion appears to be largely against hospitals. This is in addition to the fact that the health care industry is now experiencing a new dawn, where the patients have become more informed about their health needs and are no longer submissive to their physician's instruction only but play a more active role in their health care related decisions. Thus, health care providers have realised that one of the ways to manage these challenges is the use of Public Relations Officers (PROs) and that it is much easier and less expensive to retain old patients than to find new ones. This study was to find out whether public relations officers in hospitals are necessary; to find out the strategies/tools used by PROs to reach out to the public/clients; factors that affect proper functioning of PROs; and to propose a job description and reporting relationship for PROs in hospitals. The aim was to explore the need for Public Relations Officers/Departments in Hospitals as a strategy to reach their audience and to establish a sustainable relationship with them. 24

The research was a descriptive cross sectional study, which largely used qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. Ten hospitals from the Government, PNFP and PFP facilities were selected purposively to represent urban hospitals in the study area. Kampala was selected because it is the busiest district with a generally more informed and enlightened group of people and, therefore, the practice of public relations was expected to be high. Key informants were public relations officers and other respondents were top managers of the hospitals. The results showed that Public Relations Officers in hospitals in Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) were still minimal but steadily increasing. Although there were no PROs in most hospitals, there were people responsible for public relations activities in all the hospitals. Majority were in agreement that they were necessary and, therefore, important to the existing hospitals and one of the main reasons was that they act as a link between communities and hospitals and they also improve on the hospital image. The most effective strategies applied by the PROs were first determining the target public, developing contact base, selecting a story to communicate and writing press releases and this was done through the various public relation tools which included advertising, publications, seminars, suggestion boxes and internal notice boards and these have been effective in creation of awareness about the services offered and generating opportunity for getting feedback from the clients hence improving on the information flow amongst the hospital staff and the public. Although the need for PROs was expanding and growing rapidly in most hospitals, there were factors affecting its proper functionality and these included; delays in decision making, lack of the post in most government hospital structures, misconception by top managers, lack of resources and poor facilitation. Most PROs had job descriptions and these differed from one hospital to another depending on the mission and vision of those hospitals. These stipulated their job title, whom to report to, job purpose, roles and duties, qualifications and competences. The researcher recommends that the Ministry of Public Service considers revision of job descriptions and specifications for jobs in Local Governments to include the PROs as a strategy for hospitals to improve on their image, reach their audience and establish a sustainable relationship with them.

For public relations activities to be successful they must include public opinion, research, a strong employee sensitisation campaign and an aggressive community outreach programme. The management should sensitise their members of staff about the importance of quality customer service and aim to change their attitudes.

Key Words: Need, Public Relations Officers, Departments, Hospitals, Kampala Capital City Authority.