The Story as Catalyst for Change

As healthcare leaders we gather data and use the numbers to guide our decisions and make strategic plans for our organization’s future. Sometimes, however, we come across a patient story so revealing and so humbling that it compels us to act now. The all-to-real human experience as relayed to us by a distraught mother, by the trustee-turned-patient, or by a trusted staff member becomes so palpable that it is clear what change is urgently needed. The story becomes the catalyst for change.

That is the premise behind “Inspired to Change: Improving Patient Care One Story at a Time,” a compilation edited by Linda Larin. Her book contains perspectives written by patients, family members and healthcare providers that illustrate patient care at its shining best and shameful worst. Larin’s hope in preparing this volume is that the stories will influence healthcare leaders and providers to discover better methods for delivering care that is more patient- and family-centered, safer and more efficient.

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Her book challenges us to envision a future far from today’s status quo. In one chapter, Larin reminds us that hospitals only adopted smoking bans beginning in the 1980s. Prior to that time, the right of staff and patients to smoke was practically unquestioned. “It’s time to consider healthcare with a new lens and ask ourselves: What are we doing today that will be obsolete tomorrow? What will compel us to challenge the status quo?” she asks.

In chapters with titles such as “Going Above and Beyond Expectations,” “Looking Back with Regret,” “A Little Caring Goes a Long Way,” “The Stress of Illness,” and “A Day in the Life of a Hospital,” Larin’s collection of stories challenges the reader to see opportunities for improvement. Each chapter concludes with lessons learned, resources for more information, and recommended readings.

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The editor and healthcare executive encourages her colleagues to listen to their patients, draw out their stories and learn from the lessons hidden within. Patients with chronic illnesses, she says, often have so much experience of the healthcare system that they know our organizations’ strengths and weaknesses better than we do. “We need only ask for their input,” she suggests.
“The reality of healthcare, as any experienced leader or clinician knows, is that it is full of stories about patient–staff interactions. Some are incredibly poignant and are a tribute to humankind, but others are dramatically sad and insensitive and show us that we could and should have performed better. From these, we attempt to gain a better understanding and improve for the future,” she writes.

This book will live up to its title: it will inspire you to make lasting changes at your hospital or health system to provide the kind of quality care that you would want for yourself and for your loved ones.