

PATIENT COMPLAINT MANAGEMENT AS A STRATEGY TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF HOSPITAL SERVICES

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Received : 01 August 2025

Revised : 11 August 2025

Accepted : 30 August 2025

Published : 24 September 2025

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.54443/morfai.v5i3.4135>

Link Publish : <https://radjapublika.com/index.php/MORFAI/article/view/4135>

Abstract

Patient complaints are an inevitable phenomenon in hospital service delivery and reflect the gap between patient expectations and the reality of the services received. Ineffective complaint management has the potential to reduce public trust, damage the hospital's image, and hinder efforts to improve service quality. This study aims to analyze the role of complaint management as a strategy for improving hospital service quality through a literature review of various scientific articles, books, and health regulations over the past five years. The results of the study indicate that the forms and patterns of patient complaints are generally related to aspects of timeliness, communication quality, administrative procedures, costs, and the attitudes of health workers. Complaint management plays a crucial role in strengthening the quality system through early detection mechanisms for service weaknesses, increasing patient satisfaction, and encouraging organizational change that is more oriented towards the needs of service users. The effectiveness of complaint management is influenced by top management commitment, human resource capacity, clarity of internal regulations, and information technology support.

Keywords: *Complaint Management, Hospital Service Quality.*

INTRODUCTION

The quality of healthcare services in hospitals is a key indicator of an institution's success in meeting patient needs and expectations. In the context of modern healthcare, patients are viewed not only as recipients of services but also as those with the right to express their assessments, complaints, and expectations regarding the quality of services provided (Patattan, 2021). Patient complaints provide a tangible form of feedback that can serve as an evaluation instrument and an opportunity for continuous improvement (Waine et al., 2020). However, in many hospitals, complaints are often perceived as obstacles or threats, rather than as a strategic source of information for improving service quality. This paradigm needs to be changed, as effective complaint management can actually strengthen the hospital's overall service quality system (Prawiroharjo et al., 2020). In practice, patient complaints encompass a wide range of issues, from delays in service and medical staff attitudes to cost transparency and facility availability. Various studies have shown that poorly managed complaints can potentially lower patient satisfaction levels, damage the hospital's image, and even impact the institution's sustainability. Conversely, systematic, transparent, and responsive complaint management can increase patient trust, strengthen loyalty, and serve as a tool for public accountability (Wahyuningsih & Utami, 2023). This aligns with the principle of *patient-centered care*, which emphasizes the importance of patient involvement in every aspect of healthcare (Rumintjap et al., 2024).

Normatively, Indonesian regulations emphasize the importance of patient complaint management mechanisms. Law Number 44 of 2009 concerning Hospitals and hospital accreditation standards mandate that every hospital must provide facilities and procedures for handling patient complaints (Putra et al., 2022). However, implementation in the field still faces various obstacles, ranging from the lack of an integrated reporting system, limited human resources, to a low culture of responsive service to complaints. This situation indicates a gap between regulations and reality, which requires strengthening complaint management strategies as part of quality improvement efforts. Complaint management is not just about solving short-term problems, but also serves as an organizational learning mechanism. Every complaint submitted by a patient can be analyzed to identify the root cause, assess the effectiveness of service procedures, and formulate policies for continuous improvement. Therefore, hospitals that are able to proactively manage complaints will be more adaptive to changing patient needs, better prepared to face competitive demands, and more focused on improving service quality (Ariyani & Eriska, 2019).

Based on this background, this study focuses on patient complaint management as a strategy for improving the quality of hospital services. The study focuses on how hospitals integrate complaint handling into their quality management systems, the factors influencing the effectiveness of complaint management, and its implications for patient satisfaction and trust. Therefore, this research is expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions to the development of patient-centered hospital quality systems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hospital Service Quality

Health Service Quality is the level of health care for individuals and communities that can improve optimal health outcomes, provided in accordance with service standards and the latest scientific developments, and to fulfill patient rights and obligations. To realize safe and quality health care, every independent doctor's and dentist's practice, clinic, community health center, hospital, health laboratory, and blood transfusion unit as part of the health care facility is required to meet national health care quality indicators (Fachrurrozi et al., 2023). Internal Quality Improvement is Hospitals undertake periodic quality improvement efforts, including establishing, measuring, reporting, and evaluating quality indicators, as well as reporting patient safety incidents. Internal quality improvement is crucial for hospitals to ensure service quality. External Quality Improvement is part of the overall hospital service quality improvement effort. Activities included in external quality improvement include licensing, certification, and accreditation. Hospitals continuously improve both internal and external quality (Fitriani et al., 2024). The national health service quality indicator is a tool for assessing and evaluating independent physician and dentist practices, clinics, community health centers, hospitals, health laboratories, and blood transfusion units in maintaining and improving the quality of health services. The Quality Indicator Regulation serves as a reference for the central government, regional governments, independent physician and dentist practices, clinics, community health centers, hospitals, health laboratories, and blood transfusion units in measuring and evaluating the quality of health services in accordance with the established Quality Indicators (Fitriani et al., 2024)

METHOD

This research employed a literature review method with a descriptive qualitative approach. This literature study was chosen because it provides a comprehensive understanding of patient complaint management practices in relation to improving the quality of hospital services. The data used were sourced from reputable scientific journal articles, academic books, policy reports, and official documents related to healthcare regulations, both nationally and internationally. The data collection process was conducted through a systematic search of online databases such as PubMed, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, and Garuda with a publication range of 2019–2025. The keywords used included: *patient complaint management*, *hospital service quality*, *patient satisfaction*, and *healthcare quality improvement*. The inclusion criteria in literature selection included: (1) articles discussing patient complaint management in hospitals; (2) publications relevant to the quality of healthcare services; (3) research within the last five years; and (4) available in Indonesian or English. Meanwhile, the exclusion criteria included opinion articles without a scientific basis, literature that did not discuss aspects of hospital services, and publications with unverifiable data. The collected data was then analyzed using content analysis techniques by identifying key themes, comparing findings across sources, and synthesizing the information to build a conceptual framework on the role of patient complaint management in improving the quality of hospital services. Data validity was maintained through *source triangulation*, which involves comparing findings from various literatures to obtain a more objective and comprehensive picture.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Forms and Patterns of Patient Complaints in Hospitals

Patient complaints are a crucial indicator in assessing the quality of hospital services because they reflect a discrepancy between patient expectations and the actual service received. Complaints take a wide variety of forms and generally encompass both medical and non-medical aspects of care (Ariadi, 2019). Several studies confirm that patient complaints most frequently arise around waiting times, healthcare provider attitudes, communication, service costs, and limited facilities and infrastructure (Ginting et al., 2024; Hidayati et al., 2025). Complaints related to waiting times typically arise from delayed examinations, slow administration, or poorly managed queues. This indicates managerial issues that directly impact the patient experience. Furthermore, the attitude of healthcare workers is a dominant factor in the emergence of complaints. Patients tend to judge service quality based on the behavior of doctors, nurses, and administrative staff in their interactions. Rudeness, lack of empathy, and limited

communication often lead to dissatisfaction, which then manifests itself in complaints. Saputra & Murti (2020) found that most patient complaints stem from communication failures, not clinical errors. This reinforces the view that interpersonal interactions play a significant role in perceptions of service quality. Cost transparency is also a significant source of complaints, particularly in developing countries, including Indonesia. Mismatches between cost information and actual payments, differences in rates between units, or a lack of clarity in the health insurance claims system often trigger dissatisfaction. These factors not only impact patient satisfaction but also foster distrust in the hospital system as a whole (Saputra & Murti, 2020). In addition to the aforementioned dimensions, limited facilities and infrastructure, such as inadequate treatment rooms, limited medical support facilities, and an uncomfortable hospital environment, are also triggers for complaints. Unfavorable physical conditions can degrade the quality of the patient experience, even if medical care has been provided according to standards. In this context, complaints are understood not only as an expression of dissatisfaction but also as a reflection of gaps in the hospital service system that require serious attention (Saputra & Murti, 2020).

Patient complaint patterns also show certain trends. Administrative complaints, such as service delays or cost issues, are generally submitted through formal channels, such as complaint counters or patient satisfaction forms. Conversely, complaints related to the attitude of healthcare workers or the quality of service are often submitted informally, either through social media, patient-to-patient conversations, or direct reports to family members. This phenomenon emphasizes the need for hospitals to consider various complaint channels, both formal and informal, to fully capture the voice of patients. From a quality management perspective, every form and pattern of patient complaint has strategic value as a source of information. If ignored, complaints can have negative impacts, including decreased satisfaction, damaged hospital image, and potential lawsuits. However, when managed systematically, patient complaints can provide important input for improving procedures, increasing human resource capacity, and strengthening service systems that are more responsive to patient needs. Therefore, understanding the forms and patterns of patient complaints is a crucial first step in developing effective complaint management that is oriented towards improving the quality of hospital services.

The Role of Complaint Management in Improving Service Quality

Patient complaint management plays a highly strategic role in efforts to improve the quality of hospital services. Complaints are not simply expressions of patient dissatisfaction, but rather a form of feedback that can serve as an objective indicator of the extent to which hospital service quality meets community standards and expectations. Therefore, systematic complaint management not only serves to resolve individual problems but also contributes to comprehensive and sustainable service quality improvement (Sumarno, 2020). One of the primary roles of complaint management is as a tool for monitoring and evaluating service quality. Data from patient complaints can be used to identify weaknesses in the service system, whether clinical, administrative, or non-clinical. For example, complaints about long waiting times indicate problems with the service flow, while complaints about the attitudes of healthcare workers reflect the need for improved communication skills and empathy. Through root cause analysis, each complaint can be used as a basis for formulating more targeted improvement policies.

Furthermore, complaint management also plays a role in building patient trust and loyalty. Patients who feel their complaints are heard and acted upon promptly and transparently will have a positive perception of the hospital. This aligns with research by Mulyani & Agustina (2025), which shows that responsive responses to complaints can increase patient satisfaction and strengthen the hospital's image. Conversely, ignoring patient complaints not only reduces trust but can also pose legal risks and reputational damage. Therefore, effective complaint management is an effective risk management mechanism in healthcare organizations. In the context of quality improvement, complaint management also serves as a learning tool for the organization. Each complaint provides valuable information about the gap between standard operating procedures and the reality of service delivery on the ground. When hospitals utilize patient complaints as a source of knowledge, the organization becomes more adaptable in implementing service innovations. For example, an increase in complaints related to cost transparency can encourage hospitals to develop a digital cost information system for greater patient access. This process demonstrates that complaints can be a driving force for transforming services toward a more modern, patient-centered approach. Furthermore, complaint management plays a role in meeting accreditation standards and healthcare regulations. In Indonesia, regulations require every hospital to provide a patient complaint handling mechanism as part of its quality system. Hospital accreditation assesses the institution's ability to manage complaints with clear, measurable, and documented procedures. Therefore, effective complaint management not only improves internal quality but also demonstrates compliance with external regulations, ultimately enhancing the institution's legitimacy in the public eye.

Another equally important role is fostering a culture of humanistic service . When hospitals establish a transparent complaints system, healthcare workers are encouraged to be more responsible and conscientious in providing services. A culture of openness to criticism fosters a more professional, accountable, and patient-satisfaction-oriented work environment. This aligns with the principle of *patient-centered care* , which places patient needs, preferences, and values at the center of the entire healthcare process. Thus, complaint management is not merely an administrative activity, but an integral part of a hospital's quality improvement strategy. Its role encompasses evaluative, preventive, educational, and transformational functions. Hospitals that effectively manage complaints will be better prepared to face competitive challenges, more responsive to the dynamics of patient needs, and more sustainable in maintaining service quality.

Factors Influencing the Effectiveness of Complaint Management

The effectiveness of patient complaint management is not solely determined by the availability of a complaint mechanism but is also influenced by a number of interrelated factors. These factors include systems, human resources, organizational support, and even the hospital's service culture. Understanding these factors is crucial for optimal complaint management and a significant contribution to improving service quality. The first factor is an easily accessible reporting system and complaint mechanism . Patients tend to be reluctant to file complaints if channels are limited, complicated, or unfriendly. A simple, transparent system available through various channels such as complaint counters, digital applications, hotlines, and suggestion boxes will increase patient participation in submitting complaints. Research by Asrar (2024) confirms that the accessibility of a complaint system is directly proportional to the frequency of patient complaints. Therefore, hospitals need to ensure that reporting mechanisms are designed to consider the needs of patients from various social, economic, and educational backgrounds.

The second factor is the competence, attitude, and responsiveness of the staff handling complaints . Healthcare workers and administrative staff who interact with patients must possess good communication skills, empathy, and problem-solving abilities. Complaints handled defensively or dismissively can exacerbate patient dissatisfaction. Conversely, friendly, prompt, and solution-oriented service can transform a negative patient experience into a more positive one. This requires specialized training for complaint handlers to enable them to respond to complaints professionally and constructively. The third factor is policy support and commitment from hospital management . Without a clear policy framework, complaint management tends to be merely an administrative exercise without concrete follow-up. Management commitment is crucial in determining the extent to which complaint handling results are used as a basis for improving the service system. This support must be realized in the form of adequate resource allocation, strengthened internal regulations, and a follow-up mechanism integrated with hospital quality management.

The fourth factor is the availability of resources, both human, financial, and technological . Hospitals with limited resources often only provide formal complaint mechanisms without any ongoing resolution. However, effective complaint management requires a dedicated team, budget support, and the use of information technology. A digitized complaint system, for example, allows hospitals to document each complaint, track follow-up actions, and periodically analyze complaint trends. Without adequate resource support, the complaint management process will not run optimally. The fifth factor is an organizational culture that is open to criticism and evaluation . An organizational culture that still views complaints as a threat will hinder management effectiveness. Conversely, a culture that emphasizes continuous *quality improvement* will make complaints a valuable source of information. Research by (Asrar, 2024) shows that hospitals with an open culture are more successful in reducing the number of repeat complaints because each complaint is viewed as an opportunity for improvement, not simply a problem. Thus, effective complaint management is the result of the interaction between an inclusive system, competent staff, strong management support, adequate resources, and an organizational culture responsive to change. If any of these factors are lacking, complaint management risks having no significant impact on service quality. Conversely, if all factors are managed synergistically, complaint management will function optimally as a strategy to strengthen hospital service quality, oriented toward patient satisfaction.

Complaint Management Implementation Strategy in Hospitals

The implementation strategy for complaint management in hospitals must be systematically designed, measurable, and oriented toward continuous quality improvement. Patient complaints are not merely technical issues that can be resolved incidentally, but rather must be viewed as an integral part of the hospital's quality management cycle. Therefore, the implementation strategy must encompass structural, procedural, and cultural aspects that support the successful management of patient complaints (Fachrurrozi, 2023) . The first strategy is to develop a

multi-channel complaint system that is easily accessible to patients . Hospitals need to provide various communication channels, from complaint counters and suggestion boxes, telephones, emails, to digital platforms such as apps and *chatbots* . A multi-channel system allows patients to submit complaints according to their preferences, while expanding the reach of complaint data collection. Furthermore, a digitized complaint system also allows hospitals to more accurately document, track, and analyze complaint trends, thus simplifying the evaluation and follow-up process. The second strategy is establishing clear, prompt, and transparent standard operating procedures (SOPs) for handling complaints . SOPs should cover the process of receiving complaints, verifying them, classifying them based on urgency, and resolving them and following up. Measured procedures will minimize the risk of complaints being ignored or delayed. Transparency in reporting the resolution process is also crucial to ensure patients feel valued and receive assurance regarding the follow-up to their complaints.

The third strategy is strengthening the capacity of human resources involved in complaint management . Complaint handlers should be trained in communication skills, empathy, mediation, and conflict resolution. This training is crucial to avoid defensive responses that could exacerbate patient dissatisfaction. Furthermore, hospitals can establish a dedicated *customer care unit* with full authority to manage complaints, ensuring a more focused, structured, and accountable complaint handling process. The fourth strategy is the use of root cause analysis in every complaint handling process. Rather than simply addressing superficial issues, hospitals need to explore the underlying causes of each complaint, whether related to time management, medical staff distribution, limited facilities, or ineffective communication. This approach will yield more comprehensive solutions and prevent similar complaints from recurring in the future.

The fifth strategy is integrating complaint management results into the hospital's quality management system . Complaint data should be used as material for regular evaluations in quality meetings, used to formulate improvement policies, and as the basis for developing service quality improvement programs. Thus, complaint management goes beyond resolving individual cases and contributes significantly to improving the overall service system. The sixth strategy is strengthening an organizational culture that is open and responsive to criticism . Hospitals need to develop a paradigm that patient complaints are opportunities for improvement, not threats. This culture of openness can be fostered through inclusive leadership, recognition of improvement initiatives, and instilling the value of patient satisfaction as a top priority. A supportive organizational culture will enable all healthcare workers to be more proactive in responding to complaints and committed to quality improvement. Overall, a complaint management implementation strategy in hospitals requires synergy between an inclusive system, clear procedures, competent human resources, in-depth analysis, and an organizational culture open to change. With a comprehensive approach, hospitals can not only resolve patient complaints effectively but also transform complaints into a driving force for continuous service quality improvement.

CONCLUSION

Patient complaint management is a strategic tool for ensuring the quality of hospital services while strengthening the image of healthcare institutions in an era of competition and transparency. Patient complaints, whether verbally, in writing, or through digital media, should not be viewed solely as negative, but rather as constructive feedback reflecting patients' perceptions and real-life experiences of the services they receive. Frequently occurring complaint patterns, such as delays in service, ineffective communication, unclear procedures, and cost and administrative issues, indicate gaps in the quality management system that must be addressed promptly and in a structured manner. The effectiveness of complaint management is largely determined by various factors, including top management commitment, the competence and responsiveness of healthcare workers, clarity of complaint handling mechanisms, and information technology support to facilitate reporting and follow-up. Without clear internal regulations and an organizational culture oriented toward patient satisfaction, complaint management tends to be reactive and unsustainable. Conversely, hospitals that are able to implement systems-based complaint management strategies, such as establishing dedicated units, training human resources, implementing standard operating procedures (SOPs), and conducting regular monitoring and evaluation, will reap significant benefits in the form of improved service quality, strengthened doctor-patient relationships, and increased public loyalty to the institution. Thus, complaint management is not merely a defense mechanism against patient dissatisfaction, but rather a proactive strategy for achieving safe, effective, equitable hospital services that adhere to the principles of accountability. Strengthening this system will ultimately contribute to achieving national health care quality standards, increasing hospital competitiveness, and strengthening public trust in the healthcare services provided.

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