

Quality Qorner

Who is the Laboratory's Customer?

I met a woman (who is now my very good friend—I'll call her Wanda) when we were both supervisors in the laboratory of a medium-sized community suburban hospital. Wanda was a medical technologist supervisor in the microbiology section and I was a blood bank specialist managing the donor room and transfusion service. We worked together on the laboratory's management team for several years before she moved to another city. After more years as a staff medical technologist in a few different hospitals, she decided that what she really wanted was to become a nurse!

It's been hard for me to accept that Wanda, with whom I had shared so many work and personal experiences and outdoor adventures, would prefer being a nurse to being a medical technologist. However, smart people answer their inner call to grow and develop their minds and skills in new ways, even if it means entering "foreign" territory.

Wanda now sees the health care environment through different eyes, but has not forgotten her 20+ years experience as a laboratory professional. We have had some intense discussions about reasons for the seeming inability of laboratory professionals and nurses to understand each other. Stephen Covey said, "First seek to understand, then to be understood." Through Wanda, I am trying to understand life on the other side of the laboratory's walls.

Wanda works on a nursing station with elderly patients who have respiratory disorders. A few weeks ago she sent me this story from her actual experience.

"I had a patient with tuberculosis and needed to give him an intra-muscular injection of streptomycin. It [the drug powder in the vial] needed to be reconstituted with 1.8 mLs of saline, which caused a big glob of it to stick to the side of the bottle. After shaking, rolling, and jumping up and down for about 20 minutes, I decided that what I really needed was a vortex mixer. So I took a hike to the lab. I told the receptionist what I needed and she said to come on in. I walked in and it felt comfortable to be back in the 'hood. I asked someone in accessioning where I could find a vortex and was pointed to chemistry, which was in the back. I walked through the whole place and nobody smiled, nobody said hello, nobody came out of his or her office, nobody even stopped me! I found the mixer and left. And I was really glad not to be working the in lab any more. I consider myself a lab 'customer' and the people I asked were helpful but not particularly geared to 'service.' If your initial reaction is to defend them, I agree that the techs were busy; also, the place had no windows and is fairly isolated, which I think breeds its own mindset. A random nurse looking for a vortex mixer is not a big deal in the scheme of things, but it gave me a 'feel' for the place and I didn't like it."

When I present quality management programs to laboratory professionals, I always ask the participants who they think is the laboratory's customer. Their answer is usually "the patient"—a response that was drilled into us in medical technologist school. However, I challenge that answer, based on how "customer" is currently defined in international quality management standards, and by business and industry. A customer is the "recipient of a product

or service provided by a supplier." Using this definition, your laboratory's customer is actually the physician or clinical caregiver who uses the products and services of diagnoses, reports, results, and consultations supplied by your laboratory. Your laboratory's customer is another laboratory that sends samples to your laboratory for testing. Your laboratory's customer is *anyone* who needs information from, or services from, or help from your laboratory—like Wanda, who needed to be supplied with the services of a vortex mixer...and a smile.

So...whose customer is the patient? The patient is the customer of anyone who supplies him or her directly with a product or service. The patient is the direct customer of only the laboratory's phlebotomist, who supplies the blood collection service. The patient is the customer of the physician who supplies diagnoses and of the nurse who provides care. The patient is the customer of the dietary service worker who delivers the food trays and of the transporter who takes him or her to departments that provide treatments.

I often hear laboratory professionals complaining of a lack of respect for our profession. Perhaps a reason for their impression that we are disrespected is that we act within our old mindset that only the patient is the laboratory's customer. We don't necessarily perceive others to be our customers when we speak to them on the telephone or respond to their requests when they need us. We should not use being busy, or cramped, or sequestered in the basement as a reason for us not to know who our customers are or not to serve them as we would wish to be treated.

Smart people grow and develop their minds and skills in new ways, even if it means entering "foreign" territory. Let us enter a new world of embracing the definition of "customer" and helping Wanda when she needs us. She, in turn, helps the patient...and isn't that what it's all about?

This Month's Quality Quote:

"A customer is not an interruption of our work; he is the purpose of it." L.L. Bean

Contact Us

If you have a quality question, or an idea you'd like to share in the *Quality Qorner*, e-mail me at: lbmberter@worldnet.att.net.

Lucia Berte is a quality systems consultant who wishes to remind everyone that customer service is 1 of the 12 QSEs; and she gets real tired of "customer disservice!"



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