*Patient satisfaction and clinical quality in South Africa’s public primary healthcare*

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**Background**

Patient satisfaction surveys have gained traction as valuable sources of information for developing effective remedies for quality healthcare improvement. There exists evidence of correlation between highly satisfied patients and continuity of care, with satisfied patients tending to comply better with treatment. However, there is concern that patient satisfaction ratings are influenced by patients’ personal preferences and expectations. Another shortcoming of patient satisfaction surveys is the existence of positivity bias, with patients tending to respond overly positive due to social desirability biases. Yet these surveys provide an inexpensive way to policymakers of obtaining signals of health system performance.

In measuring the quality of healthcare, studies are increasingly focusing on the nature of the clinical encounter between the healthcare worker and patient. One way of obtaining more objective information on the encounter is through standardised patient (SP) visits.

**Aim**

The aim of this study was to explore the advantages and limitations of patient satisfaction measures at primary healthcare level by analysing the relationship between reported patient satisfaction and measures of clinical quality.

**Method**

We conducted SP visits and patient exit interviews in primary healthcare facilities in two South African provinces for three health areas: tuberculosis, hypertension and contraception. The study captured data on the clinical quality of 464 primary healthcare SP consultations and 1064 patient exit interviews. This allowed us to compare the satisfaction ratings of SPs to the clinical quality of their encounters. We also compared the satisfaction of real patients as collected through exit interviews to more objective self-reported clinical measures from their visits.

**Key findings**

The satisfaction rating of standardised patients corresponded to clinical quality measures in facilities. Patient satisfaction from exit interviews showed social desirability biases especially in areas in which the socio-economic status was low. While the sample is not nationally representative, it could be considered as indicative of the experiences of patients in metropolitan areas (most likely an upper limit to these experiences compared to rural areas), while it also provides an indication of the limitations of patient satisfaction measures.

**Conclusion**

Findings from the study add to existing literature on patient satisfaction as a measure of quality and provide suggestions for future research.

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Keywords

Patient satisfaction measure, clinical quality measures, standardised patient approach, South Africa

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