

ANALYSIS OF ROMANIA'S HEALTHCARE SERVICE QUALITY CASE STUDY: COLENTINA CLINICAL HOSPITAL OF BUCHAREST

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ABSTRACT

The quality of an individual's life is directly impacted by their health, which, in turn, relies on the quality of healthcare services provided by national healthcare systems. This study aims to examine healthcare services in Romania, specifically within the municipality of Bucharest, and to identify the key factors that influence the quality of medical care and patient satisfaction. We utilized an online questionnaire to collect responses from medical service beneficiaries in Bucharest, obtaining a total of 143 responses. The findings indicate that healthcare services in Romania are of average quality, resulting in a similarly moderate level of patient satisfaction with several complaints. According to the respondents, the primary factors influencing patient satisfaction and healthcare service quality are cleanliness and comfort, the availability of high-performance equipment and devices in hospitals, and the attitude and behavior of the medical staff.

KEYWORDS: *Medical services, Patients' satisfaction, Quality management.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Living life in good health is an important element of the human welfare. A high health standard at national level may, also, be considered as a crucial element of the human capital in a country and one of its strengths in the international competitiveness. But we all know that unexpected and undesirable events may occur in any setting in which medical assistance is being provided and, for this reason, the healthcare systems in any country should attach the greatest importance to customer satisfaction (according to ASQ), as well as to patient safety.

The most simple definition of patient safety is preventing errors and side effects in patients related to healthcare. In certain countries, the medical assistance has become more efficient and also more complex alongside the increased use of new technologies, medicines and therapies. The healthcare systems treats older and sicker patients, which often present themselves with serious conditions, requiring increasingly difficult decisions as regards healthcare priorities. The increase of the economic pressure on healthcare systems often leads to overburdened healthcare environments (World Health Organization, 2019).

Consequently, providing high-quality healthcare services ranks among the four strategic objectives of the European Union in the social protection field (alongside promoting social inclusion, providing sustainable pensions and an employment policy that would make the employer pay). This was officially communicated in 1999 for the first time, within the Concerted Strategy for Modernising Social Protection and officially confirmed by the European Council in March 2000. Hence, there can be no doubt that the healthcare and social service sector belongs to the most important fields of the knowledge-based modern service societies.

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This paper aims at achieving an analysis on the quality of the healthcare services from Romania, the Bucharest municipality respectively, and identifying all the factors influencing the quality of the medical services. To this effect, the patient satisfaction degree regarding the existing healthcare services was also measured, since orientation towards the client's expectations means providing quality services.

The initiative taken to perform a research in any field requires first an understanding of the concepts which are to be analysed. Without this understanding, it would be impossible to design the interventions and measures employed for improving the results. The analysis of the quality of healthcare services in Romania sets its starting point in explaining and understanding the „healthcare” concept, as well as in what „quality” signifies and how important these are taken in conjunction. Another aspect, which has a particular importance in analysing the quality of the medical services, is represented by the factors which influence this quality, either in a positive or negative way.

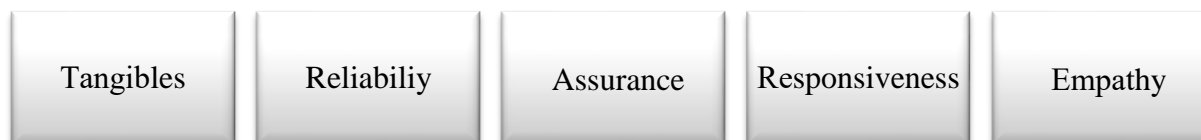
Following the analysis of the literature as regards the quality of the healthcare services, it is noted that the identified and analysed factors vary between studies, while their number is considerable. In case of one of the studies (Frâncu, 2011), there is an emphasis on the difficulties the family physicians encounter in their daily practice and which limit the possibility of providing quality medical services, namely: the shortage of equipping in medical practices, underfunding for free/reimbursable prescription drugs, the high number of consultations per month. The author also claims that the expectations of the patients as regards the quality of the medical services differ greatly according to age, personality, the social and cultural level, as well as the context in which the medical service is provided – in ambulatory or hospital.

On a different note Regina (2013) highlights various factors such as income, minority status, gender, and proximity to healthcare providers, which play a significant role in determining patients' access to high-quality medical services.

Additionally, concerning research conducted by Dyck (1996), there is a strong focus on the idea that the quality of services is contingent upon the extent of the disparity between the client's or patient's expectations and their actual perceptions of the services received. In this regard, Dyck (1996) identifies gaps that can influence changes in clients' perceptions of the quality of medical services. These gaps include:

- The expectations of the client and the perception of the service provider regarding these expectations;
- The perception of the service provider regarding the expectations of the client and the specifications concerning the quality of the services based on which the services are being governed;
- The specifications concerning the quality of the service and the effective delivered service;
- The effective service being provided and what the service organization communicates to the clients on what will be provided;
- The quality level of the service expected by the client and the perception of the latter on the quality level of the services he has actually received.

The relation between the expectations of the consumer and his satisfaction can be better understood with the help of the SERVQUAL instrument, carried out by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988), and the proportions of the service quality are the following:



Finally, we can note from the researches conducted by various specialists from different countries that the healthcare system had a series of gaps and complaints from the patients, but also from the employees in the field and that even nowadays it still encounters difficulties caused by the insufficient resources; the uneven distribution of the medical services, which limits the access to these services; the disagreement between the employees and the patients, hence complaints occurring on both sides.

All these underline the manner in which a medical system is being organised in a country and how it is influenced, respectively, and how the quality management system within it works. In each country, there is the possibility to improve the quality and performance of the healthcare system, as well as to increase the awareness degree and the public pressure to do so. It all starts from the decisions made and from the strategies implemented in this field, both on an institutional and national level.

Starting from the idea that every system, whether it is medical or educational or from any other field, is constantly compelled to improve the quality of services provided in compliance with the requirements of its clients, one must also call into question the quality management which basically deals with the verification and monitoring of this quality.

The quality management can be described as a strategy in an organisation involving all the employees and ensuring constant improving, with the aim of providing satisfaction to the clients (Seyfried, 1998). Several components are involved in quality management: quality planning, quality assurance and control and quality improvement, these in their turn directing us towards a quality management system (QMS) – defined as a system by which an organisation proposes to reduce and eventually eliminate the non-compliance with the specifications, standards and expectations of the clients in a manner as profitable and efficient as possible (Business Dictionary, 2019).

The central focus of a Quality Management System is the "client," as it serves as the guiding force driving the system's development. The primary aim of implementing a QMS within an organization is to establish a shared vision for all stakeholders, define and organize clear objectives, steer the organization toward a culture infused with quality, and, importantly, establish quality indicators for measuring and evaluating the quality of the services provided. In essence, the Quality Management System can be envisioned as a continuous cycle that begins with the clients' initial requirements and culminates in their satisfaction as the ultimate outcome.

When we emphasize that all parties involved actively engage in ongoing quality improvement, we are essentially introducing another concept in the realm of Quality Management, specifically Total Quality Management (TQM).

A fundamental definition of Total Quality Management (TQM) entails an organizational management approach aimed at achieving long-term success through client satisfaction. According to TQM, every member of an organization plays a role in enhancing processes, products, services, and the overall organizational culture (ASQ, 2019).

2. PRESENTATION OF THE QUALITY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM OF THE MEDICAL SERVICES WITHIN THE COLENTINA CLINICAL HOSPITAL

As previously mentioned in the initial part of this article, ensuring the quality of a service involves meeting the client's needs. To effectively guide and manage an organization in terms of quality, the implementation of a quality management system becomes essential. The paper focuses on the analysis of the quality management system within Colentina Clinical Hospital, according to the international reference standard SR EN ISO 9001:2008.

Consequently, the primary objective behind Colentina Clinical Hospital's decision to develop, document, and implement an integrated quality-environment-safety and occupational health system was to ensure the organization's competitiveness. This integrated system aims to effectively address the following in a well-balanced manner:

- Meeting the requirements, needs, and expectations of its clients.
- Complying with the regulatory requirements set forth by the Ministry of Public Health and the National Health Insurance Fund.
- Adhering to the legal provisions pertaining to the environmental aspects of the organization's activities and services.
- Addressing the requirements and expectations of other stakeholders involved.

To this effect, the institution has also a quality manual, according to which, client orientation for the purpose of satisfying the client's interests and requirements is a stated objective of the hospital

management. The requirements of the client and of the interested parties are particularly identified by communicating with them and establishing the „product intended for the end customer” for each case aside. The communication with the clients and other interested factors is made according to procedure code: PG – 72 – CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP (Morgoș, 2016). The chapters of the manual correspond to the chapters of the reference standard SR EN ISO 9001:2008 (ISO, 2019).

Additionally, in order to establish if the objectives have been attained, the Colentina Clinical Hospital applies the system of performance indicators approved by the top management.

Moreover, in approaching continuous improvement, the Colentina Clinical Hospital elaborates and applies an opinion survey on a monthly basis among the admitted patients, relating to the quality of the medical services, thus determining the client satisfaction level.

Between January 1, 2020, and January 31, 2020, a total of 282 questionnaires were completed by patients admitted to Colentina Clinical Hospital. These questionnaires were distributed in paper format and consisted of 18 questions, including 16 closed-ended questions, 1 matrix-type question, and a final open-ended question that allowed patients to share their observations and provide additional suggestions. The closed-ended questions featured both dichotomous scales and nominal-polytomous scales. Each question had a unique answer and was designed to inquire about the following:

- The level of satisfaction regarding the reception staff's friendliness, the quality of medical services, the demeanor of the medical staff, and the quality of information provided by the hospital regarding diagnosis and treatment.
- Conditions of accommodation.
- Cleanliness.
- Quality of meals served.
- Adherence to patients' rights.
- Health status at the time of discharge.
- Medication administered.
- Recommendation of medical services at Colentina Clinical Hospital.
- Corruption.
- Background information about the patients' residence.

Following the analysis conducted on the questionnaires filled in by the patients admitted in various departments within the Colentina Clinical Hospital, a series of results have been obtained, which are illustrated in Figures 2, 3 and 4.

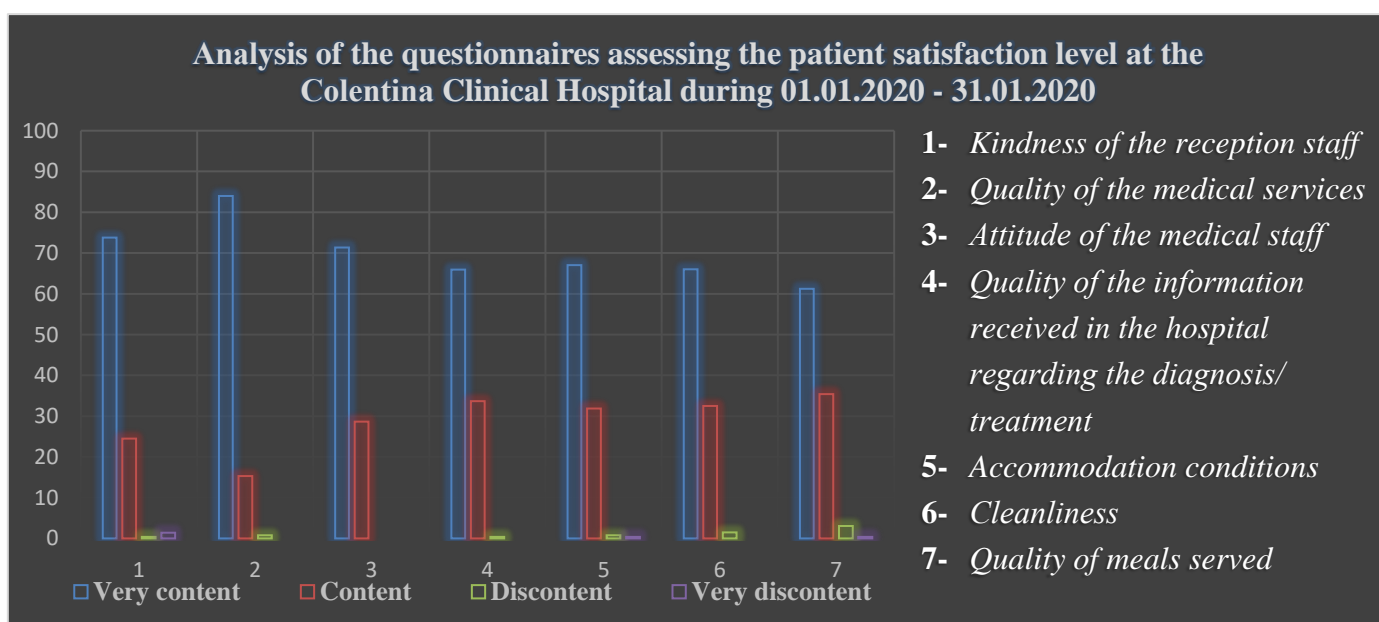


Figure 1. Results of the questionnaires assessing the patients' satisfaction level

Source: Own processing based on the results of the internal questionnaire applied by the Colentina Clinical Hospital

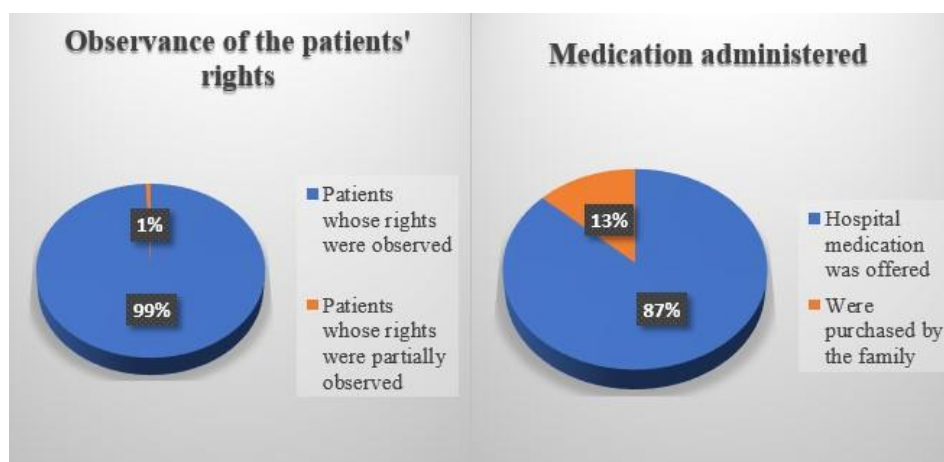


Figure 3. Observance of the patients' rights and Figure 4 – Medication administered

Source: Own processing based on the results of the internal questionnaire applied by the Colentina Clinical Hospital

The results presented in the charts above enable us to form a general opinion of the patients' satisfaction degree in relation to the services provided, the attitude of the medical staff, the accommodation conditions and also to make certain decisions for improving them. The answers to the last open-ended question from the questionnaire have signalled certain negative aspects, notably:

- Insufficient quantity and low quality of the food (departments Neurology 1, Dermatology 1)
- Improvement (the shower cabins are too narrow) and supplementation in the number of sanitary facilities (departments Dermatology 1 and 2, Neurology 1 and Cardiology)
- Lack of televisions sets in wards (departments Neurology 2, Dermatology 1)
- Lack of hot water (Cardiology)
- Old and uncomfortable bed mattresses (Dermatology 1)
- Changing the defective windows (Dermatology 2)

Adding the quality analysis of certain questions from the patient satisfaction questionnaire to all the previously-mentioned information, we can conclude that the level of satisfaction of the patients admitted into the Colentina Clinical Hospital is high, the majority of the positive results amounting to more than 60 %. Also, 99, 63 % of the patients admitted into the hospital had a better state of health upon discharge and 99.64 % of the questioned patients responded that they would recommend being treated in the respective unit to a close acquaintance, which indicates the fact that the medical services provided by the Colentina Clinical Hospital are qualitative and satisfy the requirements of its clients to a great extent, resulting that the main objective of the institution, „Client orientation”, has been attained.

3. METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

This research aims at conducting an analysis regarding the quality of the medical services in the municipality of Bucharest in order to determine the elements influencing the satisfaction of the medical service beneficiaries. With a view to attaining the aim of the research, 3 main research objectives were derived:

- Determining the patient satisfaction degree regarding the quality of the medical services in the municipality of Bucharest.
- Identifying the factors influencing the satisfaction of the patients as regards medical services.

- The patient perception on the manner in which the Romanian healthcare system manages the crisis sparked by the *COVID-19 virus*.

Starting from the objectives mentioned above, a serie of 5 research hypotheses were formulated:

1. The main factor influencing the satisfaction of the clients regarding the quality of the healthcare services is the behaviour/attitude of the medical staff.
2. The satisfaction degree varies according to age, gender, background and income.
3. The patients are rather dissatisfied with the quality of the medical services.
4. The manner of managing the healthcare services has a significant influence on the patients' perception regarding the quality of the medical services.
5. The patients have a low degree of confidence in the Romanian medical system as regards the management of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The hypotheses contain dependent variables such as: the quality of the healthcare services, the patient satisfaction degree, the patient confidence degree and the patient contentment degree, but also independent variables, such as: age, gender, background, income, behaviour/attitude of the medical staff, the manner of managing the healthcare services and the Romanian medical system. To test the hypotheses, we employed the inquiry method, based on the questionnaire instrument. We therefore elaborated an online questionnaire consisting in 13 close-ended questions, 2 matrix questions, as well as 1 open-ended question. The structure of the questionnaire closely follows the conceptual framework and the approached research hypotheses. The comparison method was also used as 2 questions from the hospital internal questionnaire were also included in our questionnaire, with the aim to showcase significant differences between the two surveys. As regards the sample structure, considering the category of subjects that best fitted our research scope, we chose to investigate the perception of the beneficiaries of medical services from Bucharest. In the end, the online healthcare services analysis questionnaire, which was distributed to recipients of medical services in the municipality of Bucharest, received responses from 143 participants. Among them, 65 were male, and 78 were female, with the majority (75%) falling within the 18-30 years age group. Additionally, with regards to their residential background, 71% of the total respondents hailed from urban areas, while 29% resided in rural regions. In terms of income, approximately 35% of the participants reported an average salary ranging between 1001-3000 RON, followed by around 21% who had a salary between 3001-6000 RON. It's noteworthy that 23% of the respondents had no income. The results presented above are derived from the initial four questions in the questionnaire, which were designed to identify the respondents and also to test hypothesis number 2: "Satisfaction levels vary based on age, gender, background, and income." Ultimately, the hypothesis was confirmed, specifically indicating that individuals aged between 18-30 years old tend to express higher satisfaction with the quality of medical services in Romania, particularly in the municipality of Bucharest, compared to those over 30 who exhibit a neutral stance, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with healthcare services. Similarly, female respondents and those with an income exceeding 6000 lei tend to lean toward dissatisfaction with the quality of medical services. The respondents' background also influences their satisfaction levels concerning healthcare services, with respondents from urban areas showing moderate to low levels of satisfaction and those from rural areas expressing high to very high levels of satisfaction.

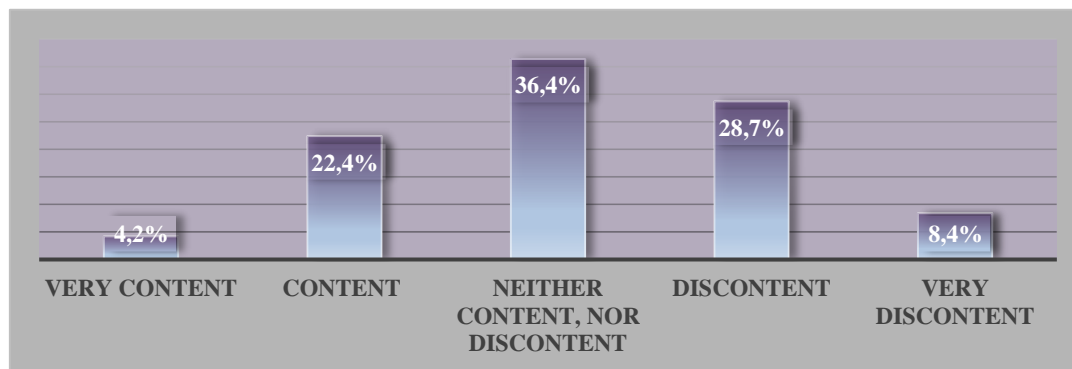


Figure 5. The patient satisfaction degree regarding the quality of the healthcare system in Romania

Source: Own elaboration following the questionnaire, 2020

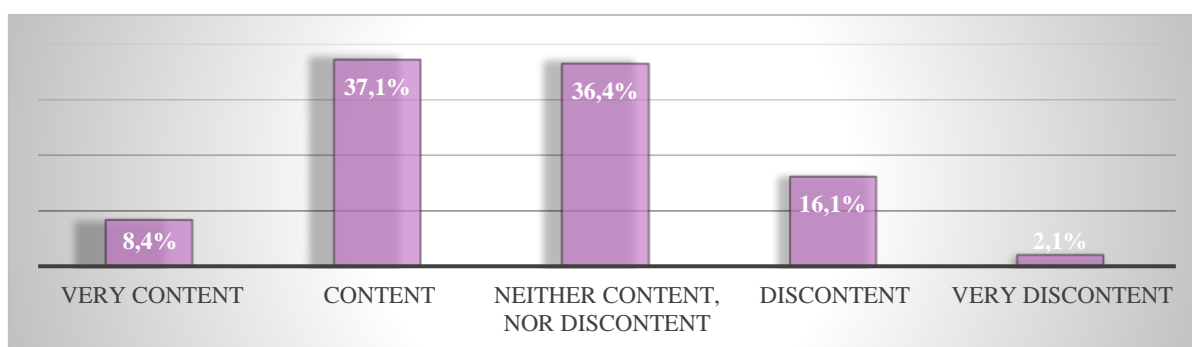


Figure 6. Patient satisfaction degree regarding the medical services provided in the municipality of Bucharest

Source: Own elaboration following the questionnaire, 2020

Figure 5 and Figure 6 reveal patient satisfaction degree regarding the quality of the medical services in Romania and in the municipality of Bucharest. According to the results, the satisfaction degree varies according to age, gender, background and income, but also varies as regards the healthcare services provided nationwide and locally. Particularly, in the municipality of Bucharest things seem better, as the majority of the respondents (37,1 %) are content with the quality of the medical services provided, compared to the patient satisfaction degree regarding the healthcare system in Romania, which is an average one (36,4%) oriented to discontent (28,7%). According to the answers obtained, hypothesis number 3: Patients are rather discontent with the quality of the medical services, was rejected and we find that the patients' satisfaction degree is on an average level, as they declared themselves neither content, nor discontent, a fact which seems to indicate that most probably there are satisfactory aspects, coupled with less satisfactory aspects.

In figure 7 we have the average on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 meaning very insignificant and 5 very important) of the aspects which were considered to be significant for the quality of the medical care. According to the assessment made by the respondents, the average of each aspect aside exceeds 4, which means that all the aspects listed below have a particular importance for the provision of quality medical services, priority lying in hospital supply with high-performance medical equipment and devices (4,52), behaviour/attitude of the medical staff (4,51), as well as in the effect of the treatment prescribed by the physician (4,5).

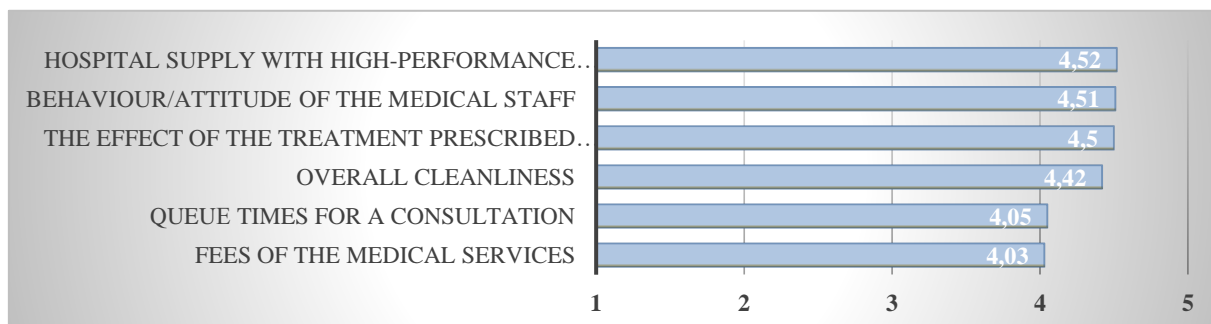


Figure 7. Patient perception regarding the importance of the aspects listed below for the quality of the medical care

Source: Own elaboration following the questionnaire, 2020

At the end of this question, respondents were asked to mention other aspects which they consider to be important for the quality of the healthcare services and which were not included and, according to the answers obtained, the following factors have been indicated by the majority of the respondents:

- Administration and procurement processes within the hospital
- The qualifications and readiness of physicians and the entire healthcare staff, along with their professional experience
- Timeliness of medical assessments
- Adherence to appointment schedules
- Effectiveness of sterilization and disinfection methods for surgical instruments
- Level of accessibility

According to data in Figure 8, we note that hypothesis number 1 does not verify, since according to the results, it was determined that the main factors influencing the patient satisfaction degree are cleanliness and comfort (66,4 %), efficiency of the prescribed treatment (63,6 %), as well as the attitude/behaviour of the medical staff and hospital supply with modern medical equipment (61,5 %), but the latters ranked on the 3rd place, being nevertheless considered as important factors for the quality of the healthcare services (Figure 7).

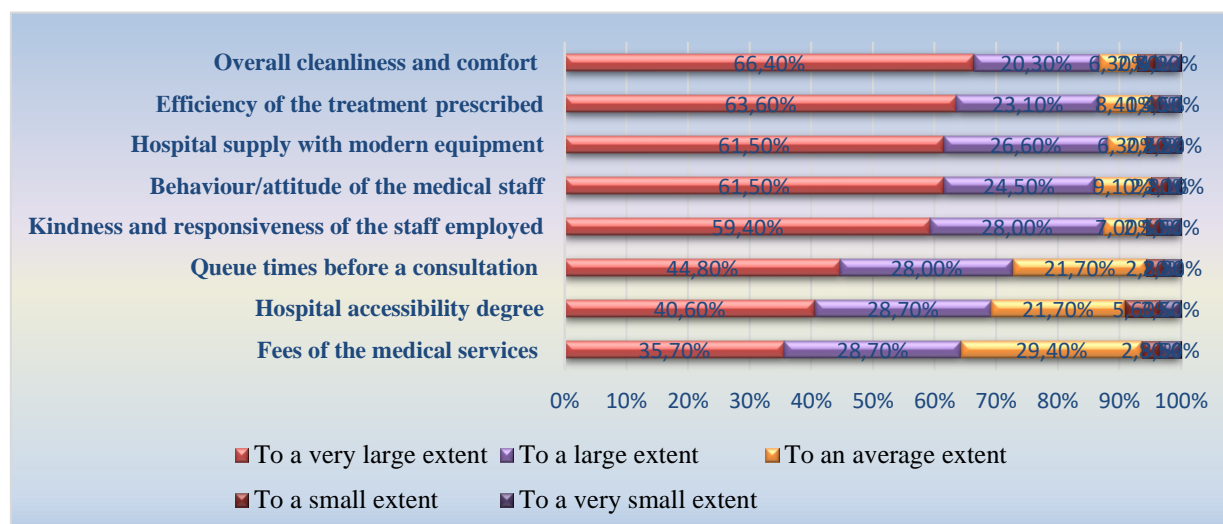


Figure 8. Patient perception regarding the manner in which the aspects listed below influence the satisfaction degree regarding the medical services

Source: Own elaboration following the questionnaire, 2020

Furthermore, Figure 9 contains the results of a matrix-type question which was taken from the internal questionnaire of the Colentina Clinical Hospital in order to compare the results obtained by them with the survey results.

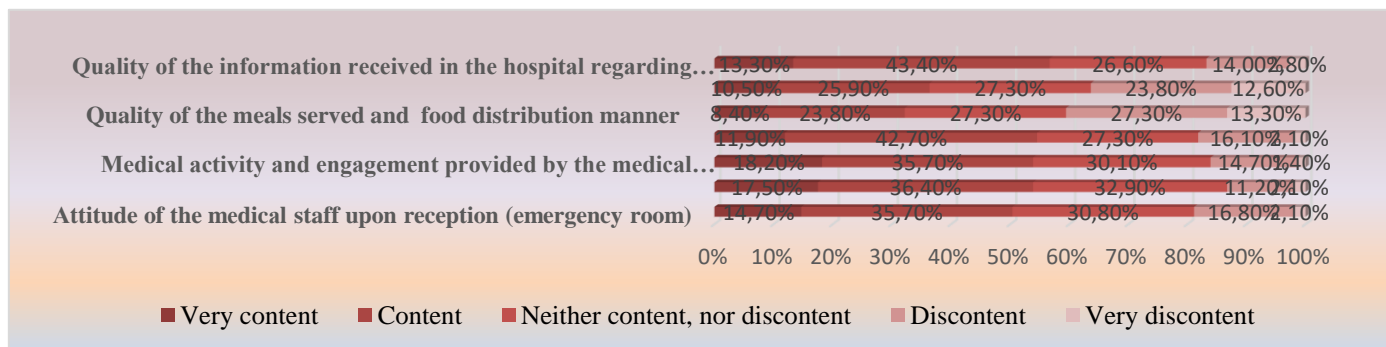


Figure 9. Patient satisfaction degree regarding the aspects listed below

Source: Own elaboration following the questionnaire, 2020

Hence, according to the results of hospital internal questionnaire, more than 60% of the patients were very content with all the listed aspects, while according to our survey results, less than 20% of the respondents expressed being very content and the ones who responded „content” account for not even 50%. In the same line, according to some answers from the open-ended question with suggestions/complaints, „at the Colentina Hospital the food is horrible and the medical staff is too short to handle the large number of patients.”

During this crisis generated by the COVID-19 virus, the healthcare system in Romania and particularly in Bucharest was responsible for the well-being and support of the entire country. We were interested to see how the respondents have assessed the actions performed by the Romanian healthcare system for limiting and preventing the potential coronavirus spread. According to the assessment made by the respondents, on a scale from 1 to 10, the healthcare system in România has managed the COVID-19 pandemic well, obtaining an average of 6,03, which means it passed the average value.

In the opinion of the questioned citizens, the actions conducted were efficient (39,9%), even very efficient in the opinion of others (13,3%), nevertheless the relatively successful pandemic management of the pandemic has not influenced the increase of the patients’ confidence in Romania’s medical system.

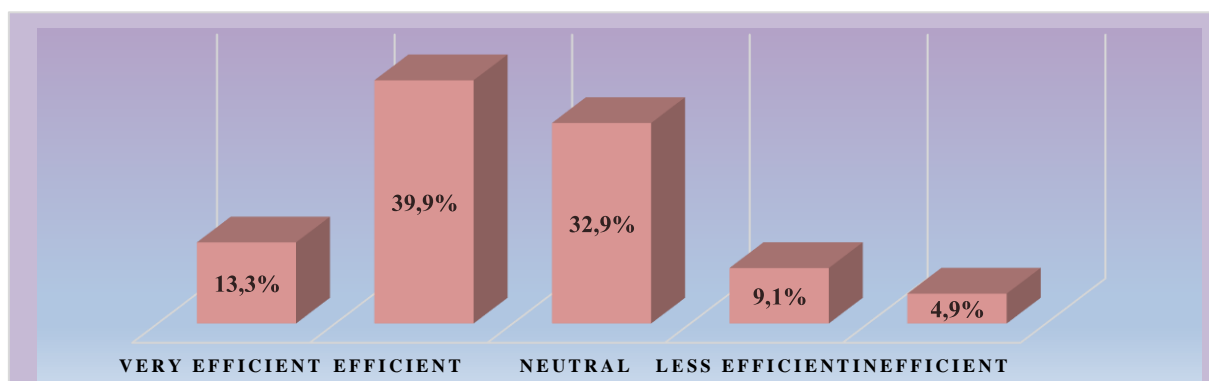


Figure 10. Perception of the citizens regarding the efficiency of the actions conducted by the Romanian healthcare system for limiting and preventing the potential coronavirus illnesses

Source: Own elaboration following the questionnaire, 2020

We consider so because at the next question, on the measures that concerned the healthcare system in Romania during the pandemic (Figure 10), most of the respondents considered that these led mainly to a decrease in the risk of illness (28,3%) and to the reorganisation of the Romania’s healthcare system

(24,3%), however the increase in the confidence degree of the patients in the Romanian medical system ranks last with 8,4%. Thus, hypothesis number 5 is validated: Patients have a low degree of confidence in the Romanian medical system regarding the management of the COVID-19 pandemic.

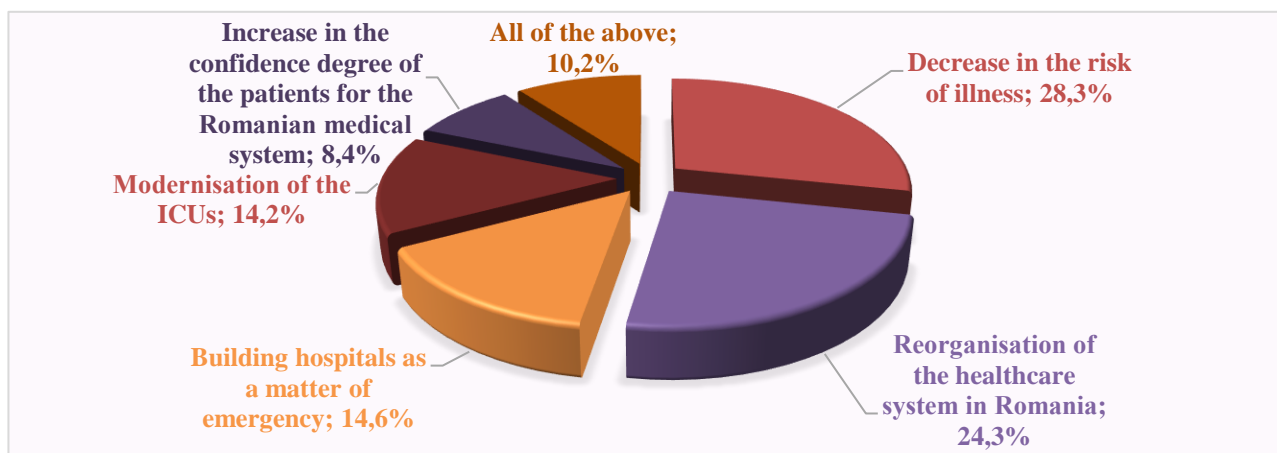


Figure 10. Perception of the citizens regarding the measures that concerned the healthcare system from Romania during the pandemic

Source: Own elaboration following the questionnaire, 2020

From the results obtained and mentioned above, it can be noticed that the patient satisfaction degree regarding the quality of the medical services in Romania is an average one and Figure 11 confirms this by the fact that 46,2% of the respondents would recommend the healthcare services from Romania to an average extent.

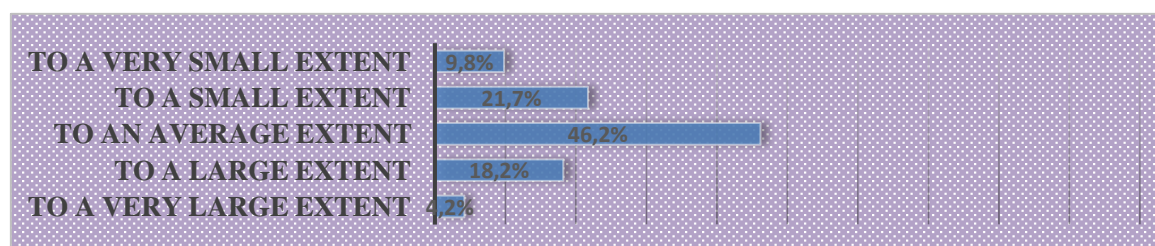


Figure 11. The level of recommendation for the medical services in Romania

Source: Own elaboration following the questionnaire, 2020

The last question of the questionnaire was an open-ended type, by which we challenged the respondents to express their complaints/suggestions relating the healthcare system in Romania. There was, of course, the risk of obtaining a low response rate, but, to our surprise, the response rate was 80%. Respectively, we mainly identified the following complaints, that were repeatedly expressed by the majority of the respondents, namely:

- Excessive prices
- The “gratifications” from the Romanian healthcare system
- Dirt
- Bad food
- Lack of interest from the medical staff
- Lack of equipment and medication
- Mismanaged investments
- Tolerance and attitude of the other patients
- Very poorly trained medical staff

But also the following proposals were formulated:

- Allocating additional funding.

- Constructing new hospitals.
- Giving increased attention to patient care.
- Ensuring the availability of necessary medicines and materials for hospitalization, along with a comprehensive overhaul of the healthcare system.
- Conducting inspections of all hospitals to assess and establish the required equipment.
- Exploring hospital privatization as a means to enhance service quality, allowing citizens to choose whether to contribute financially or not.
- Modernizing and introducing specific departments in rural areas.
- Providing professional training for physicians and emphasizing the quality of medical care.
- Modernizing both hospitals and the healthcare system as a whole.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the previously presented findings, it becomes evident that the quality of healthcare services in Romania falls within the realm of average, resulting in a similarly moderate level of satisfaction among citizens. While the overall picture may appear favorable at first glance, a deeper examination of the complaints expressed in response to open-ended questions reveals a less positive perspective. Beneficiaries of medical services continue to express dissatisfaction with the Romanian healthcare system and lack trust in it. This discrepancy is somewhat perplexing, and its root causes are not entirely clear to me. One contributing factor could be the relatively small number of respondents, which limits our ability to conduct an objective analysis and leans more toward a subjective evaluation of the Romanian healthcare system. A larger sample size would likely provide a clearer picture.

Moreover, an essential aspect to include in such an analysis is the perspective of healthcare professionals regarding the services they deliver and the challenges they face in their work. Unfortunately, obtaining insights from Romanian healthcare system employees proves to be a more challenging endeavor, as they are less cooperative when it comes to participating in such research projects with students.

Ultimately, three out of the five hypotheses were confirmed. Consequently, the hypothesis stating that "Patients are generally dissatisfied with the quality of medical services" was refuted. It was observed that the level of patient satisfaction regarding the quality of medical services in Romania falls somewhere in the middle, with 36.4% of respondents neither expressing contentment nor discontent, and closely following, 28.7% expressing discontent. In the case of the Bucharest municipality, 37.1% of respondents reported being content with the quality of medical services they receive.

Similarly, the hypothesis asserting that "The primary factor influencing client satisfaction with healthcare services is the behavior/attitude of the medical staff" was also disproved. The results indicated that the foremost factors influencing patient satisfaction are cleanliness and comfort (66.4%) and the effectiveness of the prescribed treatment (63.6%).

The quality of healthcare services can be regarded as contingent upon a myriad of factors encompassing all dimensions of service provision, including tangibles, reliability, assurance, responsiveness, and empathy, as duly acknowledged in the pertinent literature. According to the perspectives articulated by survey participants, the primary determinants influencing the quality of medical services encompass the behavior and attitude of the medical staff, as patients universally desire respectful and attentive treatment. Additionally, the availability of cutting-edge equipment and devices in hospitals assumes significant importance, particularly in light of the 21st-century's ongoing advancements and the continual discovery of more effective treatment modalities. Last but not least, the efficacy of treatments prescribed by physicians is of paramount significance, as the core purpose of medical services is to address patients' healthcare needs.

In conclusion, it is evident that the healthcare services in Romania, with particular emphasis on the municipality of Bucharest, grapple with substantial challenges, particularly within the realm of public

healthcare provision. The degree of patient satisfaction concerning the quality of healthcare in Romania tends to hover around an average level, and one could posit that it leans towards a lower satisfaction threshold. To rebuild patient trust and elevate their satisfaction levels, healthcare institutions, notably those operating within the public healthcare system, are compelled to undertake profound and transformative changes.

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