

What matters to patients in surveys of hospital care?

BY EVE GLICKSMAN

As research findings go, this was a Holy Yikes. A study of 50,000 patients throughout the United States showed that those who were the most satisfied with their care (the top quartile) were 26 percent more likely to be dead six months later than patients who gave lower ratings to their care.

The study, “The Cost of Satisfaction,” appeared in *JAMA Internal Medicine*.

Oh, the irony. The most satisfied patients not only died in greater numbers but racked up higher costs along the way. Plus, health-care providers receiving the top satisfaction scores were rewarded with higher reimbursements by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), which administers the patient survey.

Lead author Joshua Fenton, a professor of family medicine at the University of California at Davis, had set out to measure the relationship between patient satisfaction and hospital resource use, drawing on the Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (CAHPS) survey. Ultimately, his research raised questions about whether CMS is dangerously off target in collecting patient satisfaction data to drive health-care improvements.

That was 2012. More research published this year by two sociologists likewise found that a patient’s hospital recommendation had almost no correlation to the quality of medical care received or patient survival rate. The researchers looked at CMS hospital data and patient surveys at more than 3,000 U.S. hospitals over three years. The hospitals where fewer patients died had only a two percentage point edge in patient satisfaction over the others.

What’s going on? Cristobal Young, associate professor of sociology at Cornell University and lead author of the study, calls it “the halo effect of hospitality.” Young found that what mattered most to patients in ratings were the compassion of nurses and amenities like good food and quiet rooms. It’s why hospital managers are being recruited from the service industry and we’re seeing greeters in the lobby and premium TV channels in rooms, he says.

Patients tend to value what they see and understand, but that can be limited, Young continues. They give hospitals good cleanliness ratings when they observe waste baskets are emptied and sheets are changed. “They can’t see a virus or tell you how clean the room is in ways that matter,” he says.

Similarly, patients can tell you if a physician communicates well. But most people do not have the medical skills to assess whether a physician provided the appropriate diagnostic test or made suitable recommendations, Fenton says.

SEE HOSPITALS ON E5



PHOTOS BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Dotting the D.C. landscape: PPE

The author has shot images of about 700 discarded gloves, masks in the region

Masks and gloves have been strewn about the District. The author has seen the personal protective equipment in Maryland, Virginia and all four quadrants of Washington.

BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN | ¶ The first gloves came as a pair. ¶ When I saw them three months ago — crumpled blue against a bed of yellowish-green moss — I was hiking with my beagle and my partner at a scenic regional park in Maryland. What a strange sight, I thought, finding a coronavirus pandemic artifact here in nature. “Gloves are the new plastic bags,” I said. Alarms sounded in my head. Soon, I feared, we would find gloves hanging from tree branches, meandering down waterways, flitting around in gusts of wind. ¶ I’d brought my camera to the park for a story about social distancing and dogs, and when I spotted those first bits of blue in their unnatural habitat, I snapped a picture and thought little of it. Three days later, I photographed a single glove at another park, and since then, I haven’t stopped. I have now shot images of nearly 700 discarded gloves and masks. ¶

SEE GLOVES ON E6



PHOTOS BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Distinctive litter of the pandemic

GLOVES FROM E1

It's not the first time that protective equipment has provided a welcome distraction for me: Before an operation when I was 7, the surgeon blew up a glove, knotted it at the wrist, drew a face on it and delighted me with a puppet. Today, at a time of uncertainty and helplessness, I've found comfort in documenting littered PPE, or personal protective equipment, around the nation's capital. All spring, I anticipated my outings and looked forward to telling the story that unfolded. I felt essential.

This new debris was everywhere. I brought a camera on my daily walk, hike, run or bike; other than crossing a street, I never had to go out of my way to shoot these images. One morning I biked the length of Constitution Avenue and around George Washington University Hospital during an eerily quiet rush hour. Another morning I biked the hills in Anacostia. I visited parks with the beagle and biked trails along the rivers. I walked along the Mall and ran around Capitol Hill and H Street. I photographed masks and gloves in Maryland, Virginia and all four quadrants of Washington, sometimes capturing images of several dozen PPE in one day.

Even on familiar city streets, I became alert and watchful, hyper-aware of trash on the ground, as if I were tracking an animal. Eyes peeled, I'd bike with vigilance, ready at any moment to hit the brakes. Sometimes I'd spy from a distance what I thought was a sliver of PPE only to find a shard of a blue Solo cup, a spray-painted mark from a utility company or a Chips Ahoy wrapper. Occasionally, I'd see a grape-size object and would discover, up close, the tip of a rubber finger — perhaps sliced off by a lawn mower.

I took an embarrassing amount of pleasure in finding new glove colors: Orange! Teal! Lavender! I came upon gloves with fingers curled into fists of anger, splayed out in a warning, or surrendered, mangled in knots. Some were inside out and flat, others were plump, as though a warm hand had, just moments before, occupied the space. The hand gestures I saw in glove poses made me laugh. One said, "Scout's honor!" Others answered, "Okay" and "Hang loose." The lifeless gloves made the shapes of a finger heart, a peace sign and a Vulcan salute. One glove raised only its middle finger, which seemed to say it all.

In the early weeks, I found just gloves. But as health guidelines evolved, disposable masks

joined the litter; cloth masks came even later. I found PPE in gardens, in national parks, in freshly cut grass and tree boxes. I found them on concrete, brick, gravel, asphalt and sand; on manhole covers, the grounds of the U.S. Capitol, tennis courts, bike paths and hiking trails; around Metro escalators, bus stops, construction sites, military bases, college campuses and libraries; under car tires; and flanking yellow police tape. They draped over sewer grates and lay precariously close to storm drains. They waited inches from trash cans and rested on the bank of the Potomac River. They landed on the street in front of my house.

But mostly, the gloves and masks landed in gutters, washed there by Mother Nature or dropped by drivers — who I imagined peeling off their protective gear after touching the car door and before safeguarding themselves in their vehicles.

"This new debris was everywhere. . . . Other than crossing a street, I never had to go out of my way to shoot these images."

It's easy to drop something when you're juggling gloves, masks, sanitizer and wipes along with your keys and phone — I've done it. In a parking lot after a beagle outing, I dropped a mask and didn't know until my partner handed it to me. Some days, it feels overwhelming to worry about the environment — or anything else beyond our survival, for that matter. It's downright crushing to think about years of PPE cluttering the surface of our planet, littering our watershed, clogging our rivers. On days I feel despondent, I picture turtles struggling to escape the ties of a mask and fish mistaking latex fingers for lunch.

Other days I think of the smiling glove puppet — which I still have, flattened in my scrapbook — and I feel hopeful. I imagine a day when coronavirus PPE will be but a memory, when I see these pictures only in a photo album, not through my viewfinder.

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The author has captured hundreds of images of personal protective equipment. Some were seen on trails, others on the Mall or on streets on Capitol Hill, and places in Maryland and Virginia. She sometimes took photos of several dozen in one day.