



DR. İSMAİL BOZKURT, CHIEF PHYSICIAN AND QUALITY DIRECTOR, AMERICAN HOSPITAL: **'IT FEELS LIKE WINNING THE OSCAR OF THE HEALTHCARE SECTOR IN PERSON-CENTERED CARE'**

Dr. İsmail Bozkurt, chief physician at American Hospital, which was recently awarded Gold Certification for Excellence in Person-Centered Care by Planetree International, has also served as the Quality Director for many years. Dr. Bozkurt gave us an insightful interview, addressing the importance of person-centered care, the collaborative nature of decision-making stages at the hospital, the Planetree Certification process, and the Innovation Award in Person-Centered Care...



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Please tell us about the journey leading to Planetree Certification. What are the core principles of Planetree?

I am the chief physician at American Hospital, but my role as Quality Director predates this title. Since joining the hospital in the early 2000s, my interest has extended beyond medicine to quality processes. As you know, when we talk about quality and environmental management systems, patient safety takes center stage. Our overarching goal is always ensuring the safe discharge of our patients. In the past, we would hear about patients undergoing surgery for the wrong organ or receiving the wrong medication. Studies on patient safety have gained momentum since the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Nearly a decade ago, we were introduced to the concept of patient experience after our General Manager attended a conference in the USA. So we questioned how we could enhance the journey that patients and their loved ones go through during their hospital stay. Recognizing the significance of this concept, we established the first Patient Experience Office in Türkiye and began to measure our patients' experience. The measurements extended from the food served to the other services we offer in the hospital. Eventually, an experience index started to emerge.

About 6-7 years ago, an organization named Planetree came to our attention, prompting us to research the concept of Person-Centered Care and participate in various meetings. The main focus was the humanization of healthcare. Planetree was founded in 1978, following the experience of a patient in a hospital in the USA. Feeling isolated and noticing a lack of human connection, the patient observed hospitals functioning impersonally, like factories, and felt compelled to instigate change by establishing Planetree. The overarching goal of Planetree is placing patients and their families at the heart of the healthcare process. This involves respect, meaning that we respect our patients as we accompany them on their journeys.

Please define this journey.

We start by understanding the patient's priorities and values. Sometimes there are two options: You either take medication or have surgery. We need to explain the options to the patients in detail and accept their choice. Maintaining an open-mind and transparency on all issues and informing the patients at every step of the process are key. This includes detailed discussions about the planned surgery, alternative options, potential side effects, and any relevant information that the patient may need for

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decision-making. The patients should have continuous access to their medical records, which were not available in the past. Now the patients may see their files any time they want and suggest corrections in the records if needed, ensuring accuracy and enhancing patient safety.

Maintaining continuous communication at every stage and providing information is beneficial for patients, physicians, and the hospital as a whole. We are proud of our deep-rooted culture of quality and patient safety. And we have worked toward establishing this culture within American Hospital for 20-25 years. We have a Patient and Caregivers Advisory Board, which includes 6 - 8 permanent representatives. These individuals, who may include long-term oncology patients, parents of pediatric ward patients, or those managing chronic pain, play an integral role in our decision-making processes and ongoing improvements. We meet regularly with these individuals and listen to their opinions as we make new decisions and improvements. For instance, when developing a form for the Oncology department, we sought input from our patients, who all gave us invaluable feedback.

Another critical issue is the discharge process, which involves providing information about home care. But we recognize that our patients may forget or feel overwhelmed at that moment. Therefore we looked into what we could do and discovered the Teach-Back method. Besides, our patients had already asked us not to leave this advice step until the last day. Leveraging this patient feedback, we created the Ideal Discharge Form, which involves patients preparing their questions in advance and healthcare professionals answering them.

Another important component of the Planetree approach is the Care Partnership Program. We designate one of the patient’s relatives as a care partner and educate them on the progression of the illness, while teaching the essential skills for basic care. We certainly don’t expect the care partner to administer care within the hospital, but the knowledge they gain enables them to assist the patient once they return home. Throughout the process, we provide information about disease progression and potential side effects and show them how to change dressings and monitor drains. The Care Partnership Program has been very successful, particularly among the caregivers of patients in departments like Hematology, Oncology, and General Surgery, where stays can be longer. We recognize that hospital stays and care at



A Closer Look at Planetree

Founded in 1978, Planetree International empowers more than 9 million patients and healthcare providers to see the care journey from a whole new perspective. Planetree International is a mission based not-for-profit organization that has partnered with over 800 healthcare organizations in 35 countries around the world and across the care continuum to transform how care is delivered.

The Certificate of Excellence in Person-Centered Care granted by Planetree International is an organizational qualification certificate for healthcare institutions. The certification process is judged by a healthcare provider’s ability to implement Planetree’s five guiding principles:

1. Create organizational structures that promote engagement.
2. Connect values, strategies, and actions.
3. Implement practices that promote partnership.
4. Know what matters.
5. Use evidence to drive improvement.

To date, 181 healthcare institutions have received Planetree Certification (18 Bronze, 64 Silver, 99 Gold certifications). American Hospital was awarded Gold Certification for Excellence in Person-Centered Care, which represents the highest level of success. American Hospital also won first prize in the Innovation category for its “Mentoring/Reverse Mentoring” program at the Person-Centered Care Awards, which recognize the top healthcare organizations that design programs, practices or solutions to create measurable and sustainable change in person-centered care. American Hospital proudly received the award during the Planetree Person Centered Care Conference in Boston on October 8-11, 2023.



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home can put an even heavier burden on the caregivers; therefore supporting them is also crucial.

How long has the Planetree approach been adopted at American Hospital? Please elaborate on how this practice has contributed or made a difference.

While the concept of person-centered care is relatively new, it has always been ingrained in the philosophy of American Hospital. Even though we formally initiated these processes in 2017, our ultimate goal extends beyond certification and focuses on establishing person-centered care as a culture. As a matter of fact, during a preliminary inspection, Planetree representatives remarked, “This is already in your blood; you have already implemented it.” While we have enhanced certain standards to reach the expected levels, compassion and person-centered care have always remained at the core of our hospital.

Planetree has been instrumental in transforming the patient experience at our hospital. While patient satisfaction was already very high, patient experience evolved considerably. The patients recognized that we valued them, appreciated their ideas and understood how they felt. This was a priceless improvement. Furthermore, key quality indicators increased, leading to increased medication compliance and shorter hospital stays.

Through the Care Partner Program, caregivers acquire essential knowledge about at-home care, leading to a reduction in hospital stays from five days to three.

Since the patients are involved in the decision-making processes, they gain more awareness and heal faster. In addition, medication errors and hospital infection rates decline.

Would it be fair to say that Planetree has transformed the hospital’s perception as a sad place into a happier place?

Planetree’s person-centered care approach also involves the employees in the process. We are exploring avenues to enhance the well-being and happiness of our staff. Particularly with COVID-19, the burnout rate among healthcare professional has risen significantly. We want to create a happy work environment for our staff. Therefore, we have been running a campaign focused on employee satisfaction for the last 3-4 years. Through regular surveys, we seek feedback from our healthcare professionals to understand their priorities and expectations for a positive work experience.

In 2017, we launched the Code Lotus program to promote the well-being of our employees through a self-compassion training. We recognize the importance of enhancing happiness and building resilience and endurance among our healthcare professionals. Therefore, we encourage socializing efforts through gatherings, games, and opportunities for heart-to-heart talks. Healthcare professionals experience emotional exhaustion. So we will continue to develop even better programs and training initiatives to support their well-being.

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Did the certification process involve Planetree training programs?

We took some training courses before initiating the Planetree process. We teach all our employees about person-centered care through courses on our training platform Enocta. Planetree also recommended some training programs, including Compassionate Care. We all have compassion and empathy, but how do we demonstrate it? We organized training sessions and workshops to address this.

Communication is a key factor for patient safety. Studies indicate that physicians may, at times, only focus on asking questions without listening to the answers. One of the main principles of person-centered care is effective communication, particularly with the healthcare professionals. Various techniques, including diverse approaches to asking questions, active listening and allowing time, are integrated to the principles of Planetree.

Please tell us a little about the volunteers in the Patient and Caregiver Advisory Board and the Person-Centered Care Group.

We prefer to work with long-term patients with chronic conditions and caregivers who volunteer to join these groups because they already know the hospital and the processes quite well. The volunteers accompany our journey for 2-3 years on average. Over time, some leave, while others want to join.

We also have a Person-Centered Care Group consisting of hospital staff. In addition to managers, the group included cleaning, cafeteria and security personnel, who provide invaluable feedback. We try to include as many employees with different roles from all departments as possible to enhance diversity within the group. When we launch a new project, we always include a caregiver in the process and consult them even for procedures and instructions.

Please share the story of how the hospital was awarded Planetree Gold Certification for Excellence in Person-Centered Care. How did the process begin and progress? Were you previously involved in other certification processes?

We were awarded Gold Certification for Excellence in Person-Centered Care with a very high score. When I went to the USA for the awards ceremony, people

at the next table asked us how they could embed the Planetree culture. They want to visit our hospital and see our practices. These are all very proud moments for us. Gold Certification for Excellence in Person-Centered Care is invaluable because only the institutions that truly deserve it are recognized. When we met, they congratulated me, “You worked hard to earn this recognition of excellence.” Taking this opportunity, I want to thank our entire staff and patients for their commitment. Everyone believed in person-centered care and embraced this approach with dedication and excitement.

We were already person-centered, but we still looked into what we could improve. Some steps are not that easy to put in place because they require a cultural shift. A key factor in this respect was sharing the decision-making process. Sharing the decision-making process means that the physician comes together with the patient and caregiver to reach a decision. This is a multi-step process. First, you inform the patient, learn about their priorities and preferences, record them and give the patient time. Then, you meet again, make a decision in agreement follow up after implementing the decision.

Sharing the decision-making process, in other words, explaining the processes to the patients and providing them with the necessary materials, information and scientific results, is the duty of the physician. This approach is ingrained in our culture, and I believe it was a key factor in our high scores. At American Hospital, we will publish three papers on this subject. Planetree representatives liked the idea very much and said, “Share your experience by publishing papers,” to set an example for other hospitals.

Who were interviewed during the certification process?

When the representatives visited the hospital for certification, they barely met with me. In addition to patients and caregivers, they also interviewed several employees, including the cleaning staff and our cooks. We never instruct our patients to say this or that because it would be misleading. Still, our patients gave such positive reviews...

A principle of Planetree is: “Caregivers should be able to reach their patients 24/7.” In our country, loved



ones can visit their patients 24/7 unless the patient has an infection. The representatives interviewed a patient who had stayed in intensive care for a very long time. The patient showed them some photos and said, “Look, last year I was in intensive care and was intubated. Apparently my brother had come to visit me.”

What do you think is the key factor in achieving this success as a hospital recognized with Gold Certification for Excellence in Person-Centered Care?

I think the key factor was that we wholeheartedly believed in person-centered care. Everyone participated in the person-centered care practices and believed in them. I was deeply moved to see the employees’ dedication, excitement and sincere desire to lend a hand. Hearing them say, “I want to be a part of this project,” encouraged me. I am happy to share that everyone remains committed.

Empathy, compassion and treating each other with respect are essential to human interactions. What happens when we extend these qualities to patients, their families, and each other? We feel happier. As a result, our commitment to quality, patient safety, good care and improving the quality of care over the years was crowned with Gold Certification for Excellence in Person-Centered Care.

Do you have strategic plans to incorporate the Planetree philosophy into your operations in a sustainable way?

We will continue to do what we have always done and build on our current initiatives and practices at American Hospital. I firmly believe that our hospital stands as a model not only in Türkiye but also globally, distinguished by our commitment to quality, patient experience, and a person-centered approach. We hope to share our successful practices and innovations with other hospitals worldwide through Planetree. We are currently developing training modules such as Compassionate Care Training,

Shared Decision Making, and Communication, which we intend to make available to other hospitals as well.

At the Planetree event in Boston, American Hospital won the Innovation Award for its Reverse Mentoring practice. Please tell us more about this practice.

Planetree informed us that American Hospital was shortlisted for the Innovation Award. We had applied with a practice called Reverse Mentoring. The practice, developed by the Human Resources Department, has been available for years and we are all very satisfied with it.

Reverse Mentoring is an innovative practice that brings together less experienced employees with seasoned managers, fosters intergenerational relationships, creates synergy through knowledge exchange and encourages learning. Contrary to the popular practice, the older person learns from the younger person. The goal is to enable current managers to explore the new world through future leaders, gain different perspectives and increase communication between managers and employees. We were shortlisted for the top three among more than 800 hospitals. The other two contenders were focused on providing first aid services to local communities in the Amazon forest and energy conservation, respectively. When the innovation awards were announced at the awards ceremony, they invited us to the stage, so I presumed we were third. Then the winner was revealed and we won the award. Everyone came and congratulated us, it was an amazing feeling. It was an opportunity to promote not only American Hospital but also Türkiye. Italian and Dutch peers came and congratulated us, “You are amazing, we kept seeing you on stage!”

It was a wonderful night marked with awards for us. It felt like winning the Oscar of the healthcare industry in person-centered care and quality work. Bringing home two major awards filled us with immense pride.