

EVOLUTION OF PATIENT’S SATISFACTION REGARDING THE MEDICAL SERVICES RECEIVED IN PUBLIC HOSPITALS

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Abstract: *The patients` satisfaction theme plays a very important role in the health care systems in all the developing countries and it also represents a widely debated topic among researchers. This study aims to identify the evolution of the patients satisfaction based on data provided by the Romanian Ministry of Health as results of the implementation of the patient`s feedback mechanism in public hospitals. The findings of this study show that most of the indicators analysed have registered an improvement in the last two years and a half since this mechanism was implemented by the Ministry of Health. The analysis of the evolution of the satisfaction amongst patients might indicate further directions that might help the decision making process and the priorities.*

Keywords: health services, patients` satisfaction, health care system, Romania

JEL classification: A10, I1

1. Introduction

The health care domain has become over the years a main point of interest in all the developed countries. As an outcome, patients, practitioners, researchers, public organizations and other institutions all over the world pay higher attention to the delivery of high quality services to the patients, moreover now, that the patients have become more informed than they were in the past. Researchers have studied in the last decades many dimensions related to the patients` complaints [11], relationship between patient and the health care provider [3] or patients` satisfaction [4]. Patients` satisfaction is one of the most desired outcomes all over the world [1] in the global competition amongst the health services providers to gain the patients trust and retention.

2. Conceptual and practical framework

The measurement of the customer or patients` satisfaction represents a starting point in delivering high quality services in health care area [2], moreover due to the very significant role the patients play in the health system. The concept of customer satisfaction is considered by many authors as final goal of the marketing function and even as a concise definition of marketing [8]. The patients` satisfaction has been widely studied in the literature [7]. At the level of the European Union, the patient`s rights are now gaining more and more weight [5].

A brief presentation of the health care system in Romania is justified by the fact that this paper aims to analyse the patients` satisfaction with the medical services received in the public hospitals. A European Commission Report [6] regarding the health system in Romania indicates some areas where the national health system acknowledged improvements and areas where it is yet situated below the EU average. The main highlights of this report are: the health care expenditures per capita are the lowest in EU in 2015; the widespread practice of informal hospital related payments; although increased life expectancy, still below EU average; tobacco, alcohol consumption in line with the EU average; increasing obesity rates; cost factors as barriers in access to health care (eg. Co-payment system); unmet medical needs residing in poor access to care, especially for the people in rural areas; inefficiency in using the public resources (discrepancy between planning and needs).

A health system review, published in 2016 in partnership with European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies [12], highlighted that at national level only a few studies were conducted to measure the level of satisfaction within the health area. It was also identified, through Eurobarometer surveys that a constant low level of satisfaction regarding the quality of the health care, having the informal payments to the health care personnel as determinant factor.

The Ministry of Health, through the National Health Strategy (2014-2020) identified as first value the communication and transparency in order to meet the strategic objectives proposed [10]. According to this, the decisions regarding the national priorities in the health and health services development domain will be taken by patient`s and all the other actors involvement.

In this regards, in January 2017, the Ministry of Health published a Ministerial Order in order to approve the implementation of the patient`s feedback mechanism in public hospitals (in Monitorul Oficial nr.18 from 09 January 2017 published by the Order of the Ministry of Health nr. 1501/2016).

This feedback mechanism represents a set of measures and procedures with the main aim to evaluate patients` satisfaction regarding the medical services and also a component of complaints management when there are identified ethics and integrity incidents in the public hospitals. The Ministry of Health would like to highlight their satisfaction regarding the medical services received in the public hospitals including their opinion regarding the services quality, patients` rights respect and the moral conduit of the medical-sanitary employees.

2. Data analysis: The evolution of patients` satisfaction in the period 2017-2019

Since the corruption in health area and the patient`s rights are a topic of high interest in Romania, we would like to study whether the situation improved over the years. One of the advantages given by this mechanism is that now it is guaranteed the anonymous character of the data provided, by eliminating all the constraints.

In this paper the evolution of the patient`s satisfaction over these two years and a half will be monitored and emphasized by presenting the average results per trimesters, by processing the monthly data available on Ministry of Health page. The Reports available on the site of Ministry of Health [9] are gathered monthly and they include the patient`s responses provided both by web or text message after the patient`s discharge from the hospital.

The survey includes ten questions in order to measure the patients` satisfaction concerning several areas related to the health services received. The number of respondents that completed these surveys over the years increased, from 36950 respondents that filled in all the questions via text messages and 68,331 completed responses via web in 2017 to 46,235 completed responses via text messages and 120,387 completed surveys via web in 2018. The first two quarters of 2019 also registered an increase of the completed surveys (25249 completed surveys via text messages and 83,704 completed surveys via web). The average rate of response in 2017 was 9,53% via text messages, 24,57% via web; 3,73% rate of response via messages and 6,56% in 2018 while in the first two quarters of 2019 the average rate of response via messages was 3,80% and 12,61% via web.

The first question aims to capture the patients` level of satisfaction with the medical services provided in the hospital. As it can be observed in the below figure, their level of satisfaction improved over this period, the last quarter of 2019 identifying 23,1% of unsatisfied and very unsatisfied patients and 76,9% satisfied and very satisfied patients with the medical services received. This analysis only covers the responses received via text messages.

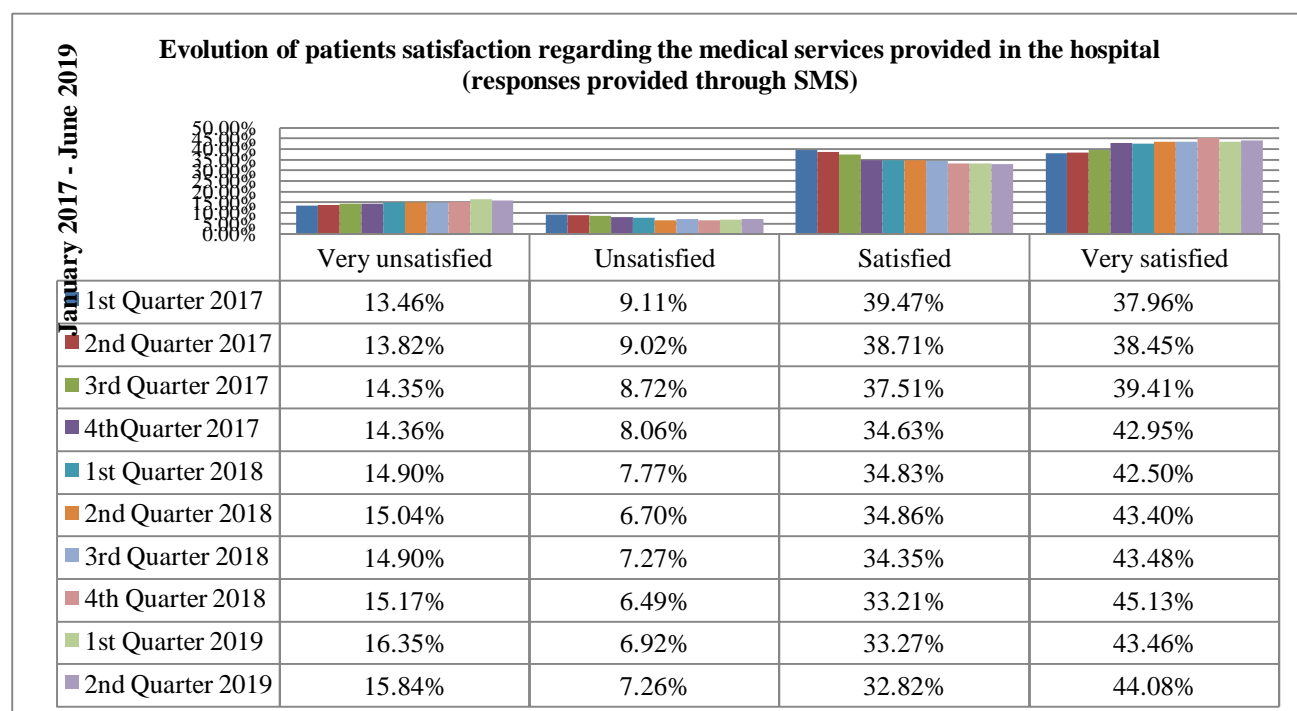


Figure no. 1: Evolution of patients` satisfaction regarding the medical services provided in the hospital (responses provided through SMS)

Regarding the patient`s satisfaction with the doctor`s activity and implication, it can be easily observed that the average rates of unsatisfied patients increased from one year to another, in the last quarter of 2019 this average rate being 17,19% compared 15,78% very unsatisfied and unsatisfied patients in the same quarter of 2017.

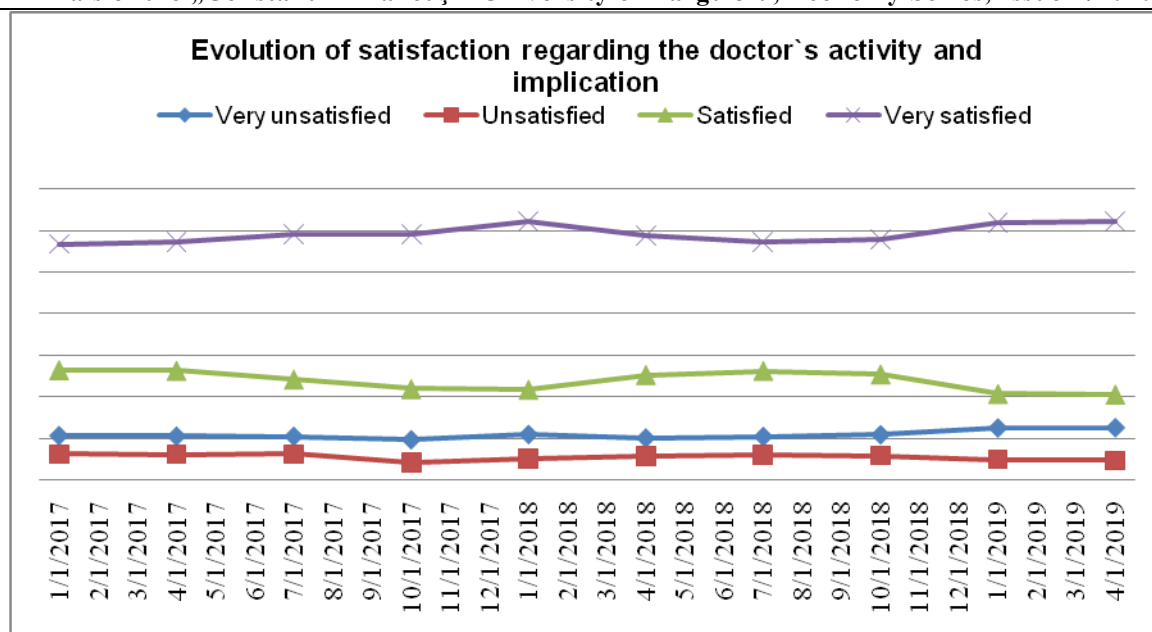


Figure no. 2: Evolution of satisfaction regarding the doctor's activity and implication

The responses to the third question highlighted the fact that the patients are more and more satisfied with the clearness from the hospital, the highest rate of satisfaction was registered in the fourth quarter of 2017: 83,59%.

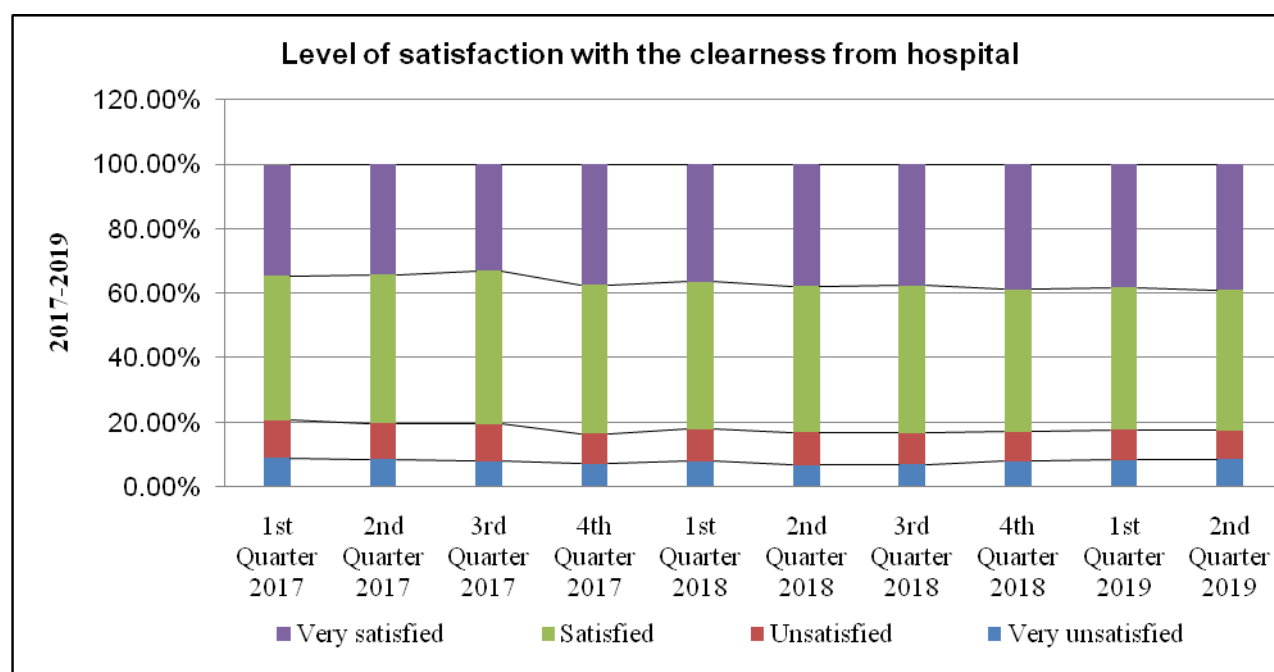


Figure no. 3: Level of satisfaction with clearness from hospital

The number of patients that claimed that they've been asked to buy medicines or other sanitary materials during the hospitalization has decreased in time, from a rate of 22,75% registered in the first quarter of 2017 to 16,21% in the second quarter of 2019.

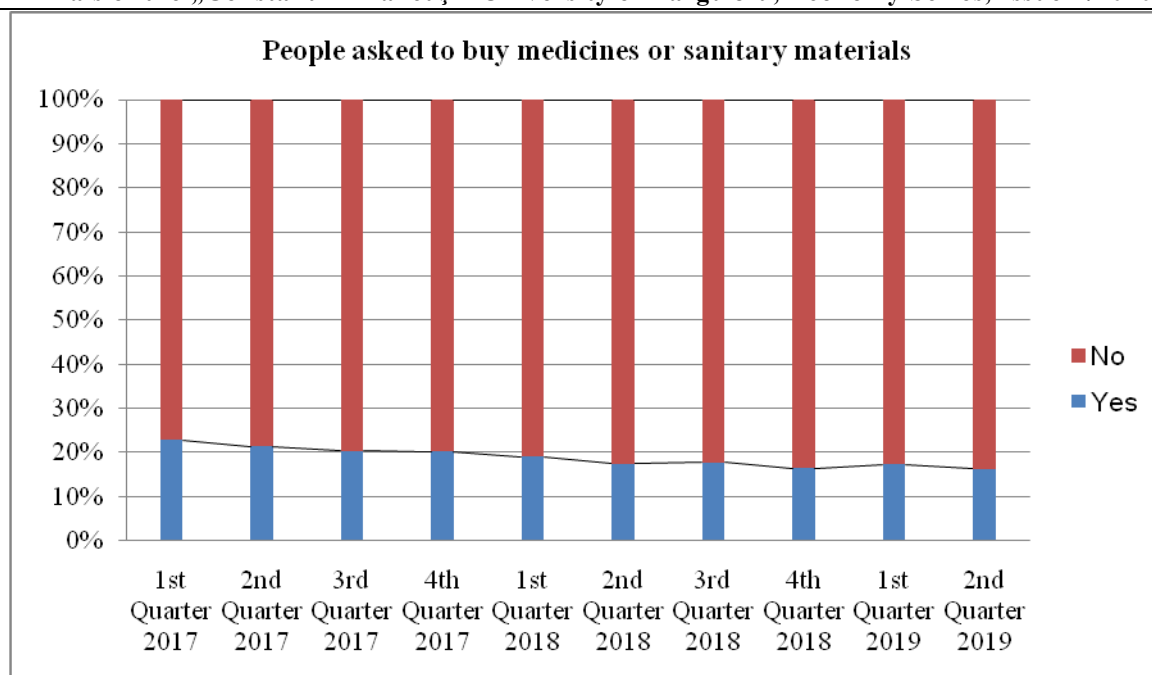


Figure no. 4: People asked to buy medicines or sanitary materials

The respondents also claimed to be more satisfied with the activity and the level of implication of the medical nurses, the highest rate of respondents either satisfied or very satisfied being registered in the 4th quarter of 2017 (86,90%) and the lowest was 83,95% in the third quarter of the same year.

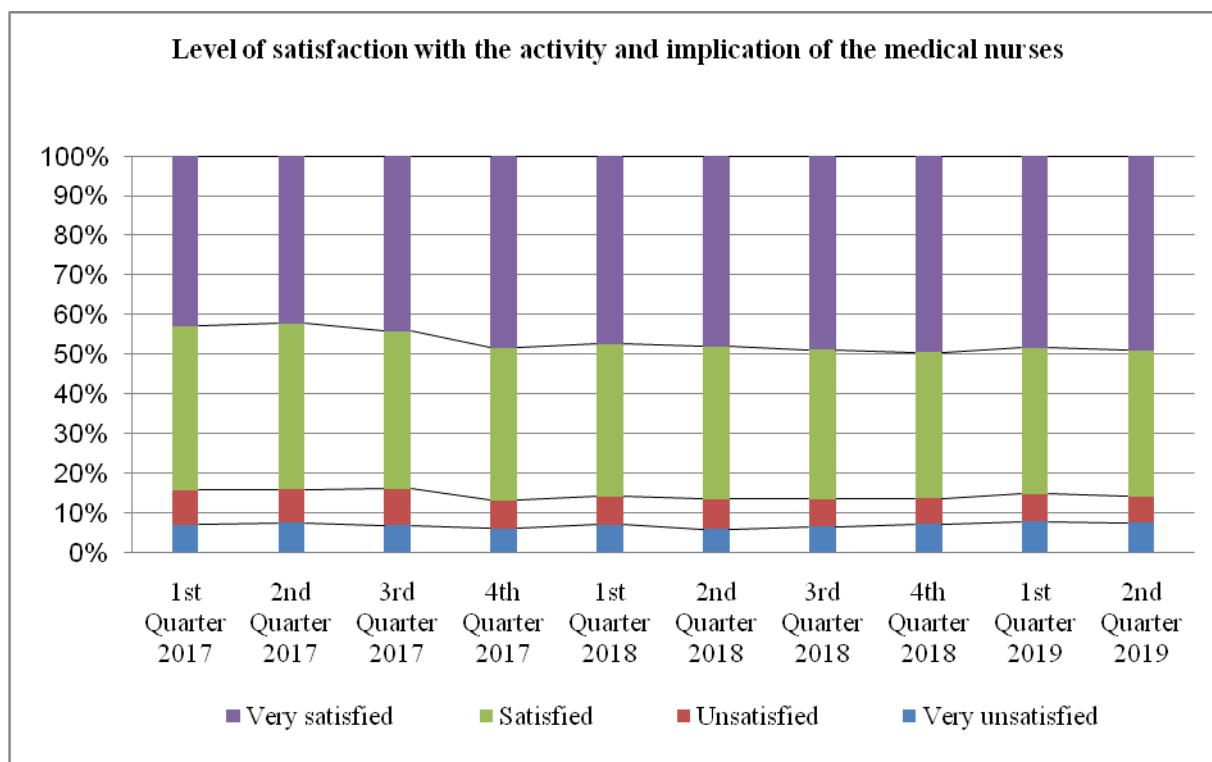


Figure no. 5 Level of satisfaction with the activity and implication of the medical nurses

An average of 88,31% of the respondents considered that they received clear explanations regarding their diagnose and treatment when they discharged, the highest rate being registered in the second quarter of 2018 (90,02%).

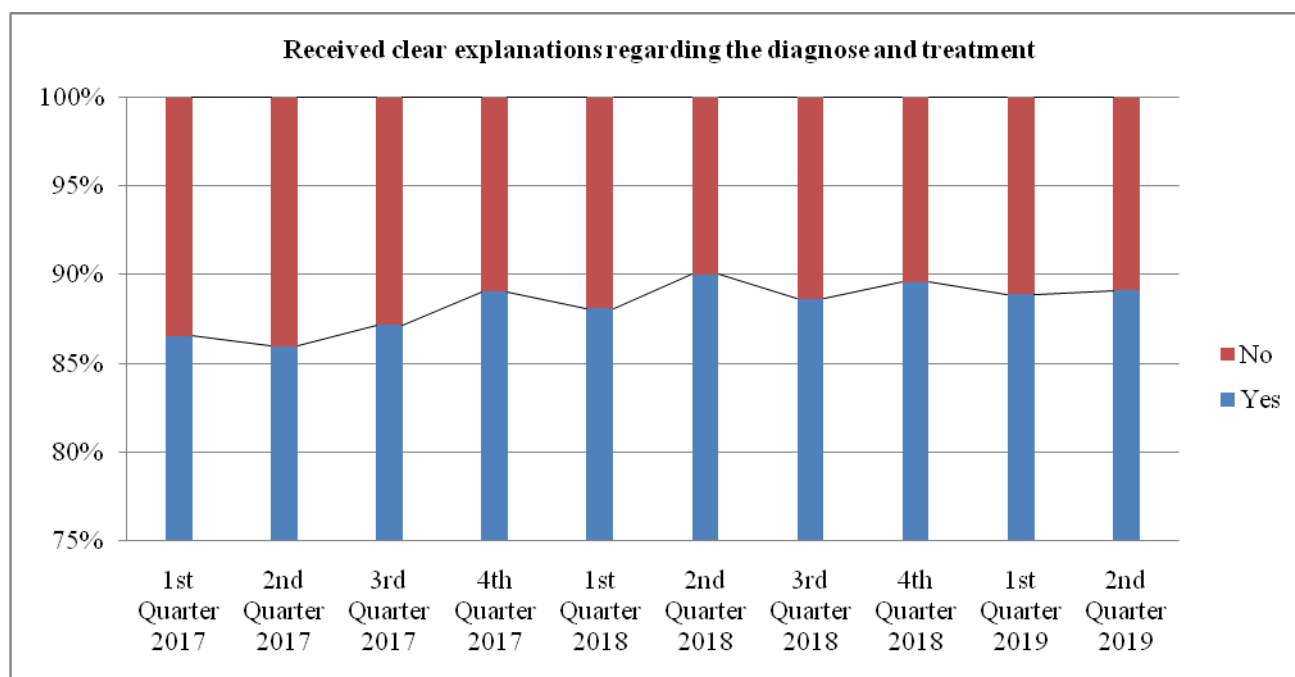


Figure no. 6: Received clear explanations regarding diagnose and treatment

A high percentage of the respondents would recommend the hospital to a friend or acquaintance, and the numbers tend to grow from one quarter (84,88% in Q1 2017) to another (87,91% in Q2 2019).

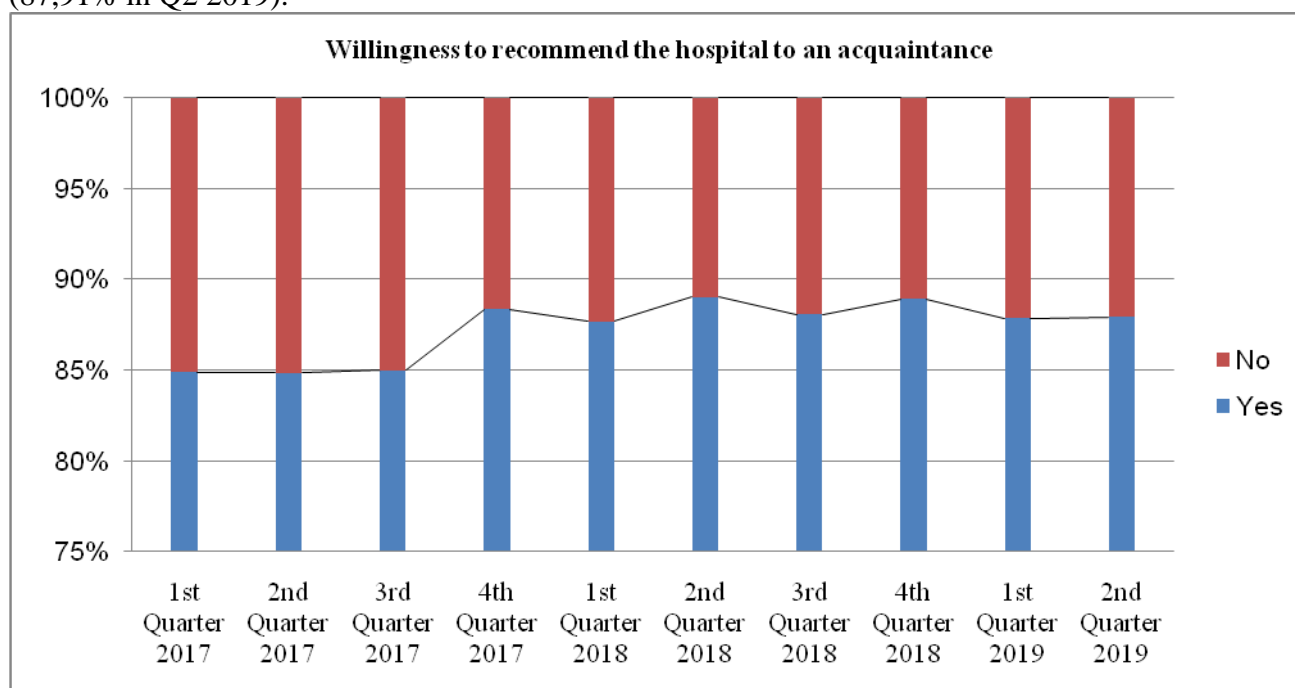


Figure no. 7: Willingness to recommend the hospital to an acquaintance

Also the percentage of respondents that consider that their health condition improved after the discharge improved from one quarter to another, from the lowest rate registered in the second quarter of 2017 (85,47%) to the maximum value registered in the second quarter of 2018 (88,22%).

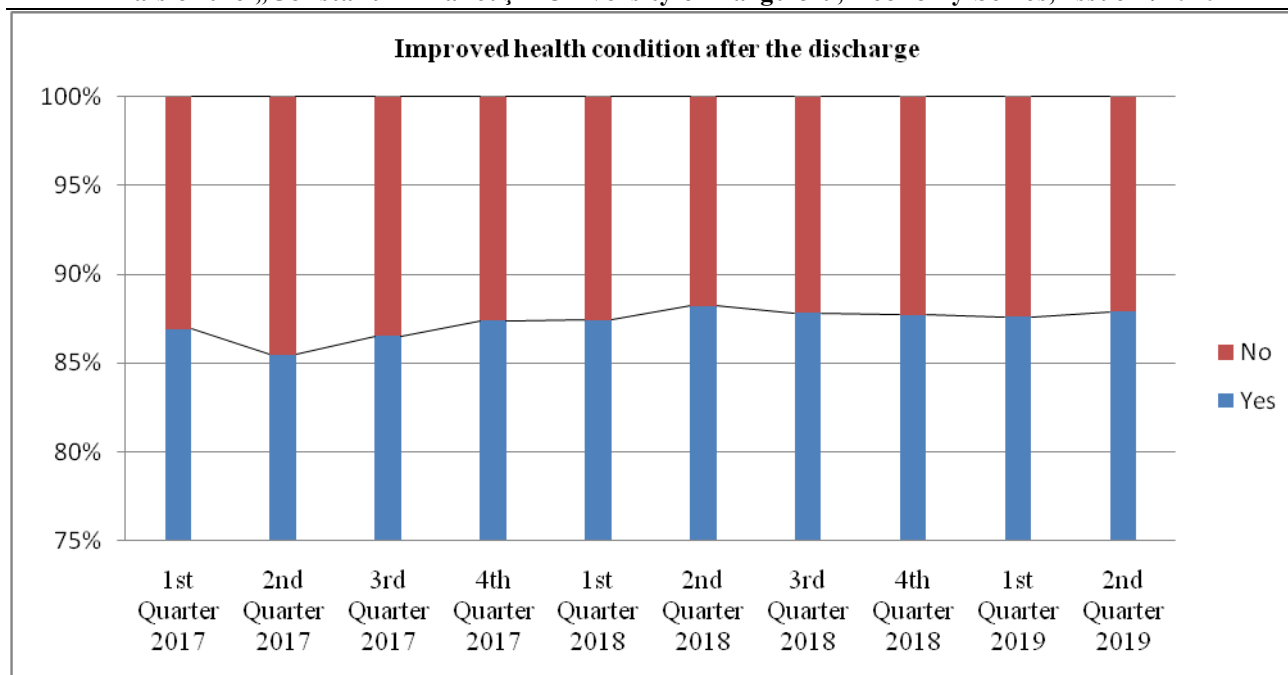


Figure no. 8: Improved health condition after the discharge

The informal payments topic was also covered through this survey. This indicator registers a descendent trend, from the rate of 5,46% registered in the first quarter of 2017 when this feedback mechanism was implemented to 3,85%, representing the rate registered in the second quarter of 2019.

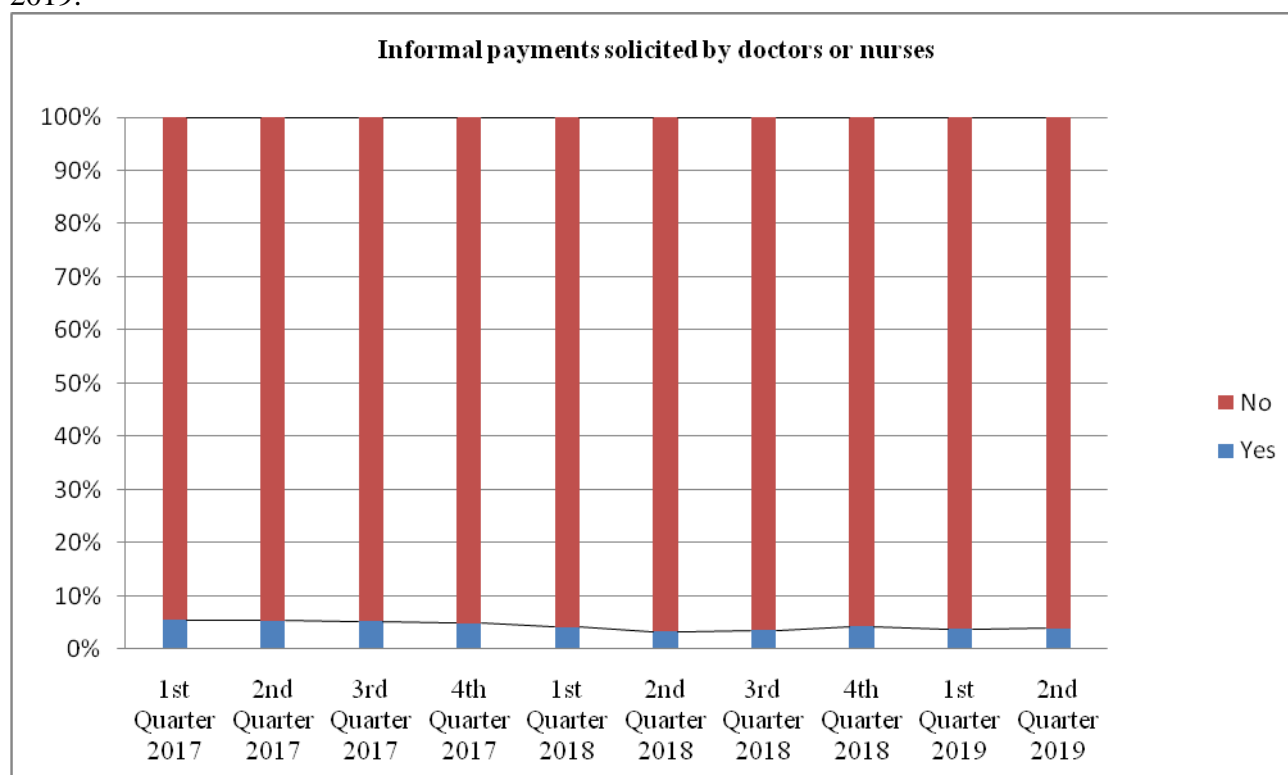


Figure no. 9: Informal payments solicited by doctors or nurses

Last, but not least, the Ministry of Health made available for the respondents a method of reporting the cases when the patients were asked to provide such informal payments. The average percentage of respondents who wanted to be contacted by an anti-corruption representative of the

Ministry of Health is 3,24%, the maximum rate being registered in the first quarter of 2017, when the rate of such cases was also higher by comparison with other periods.

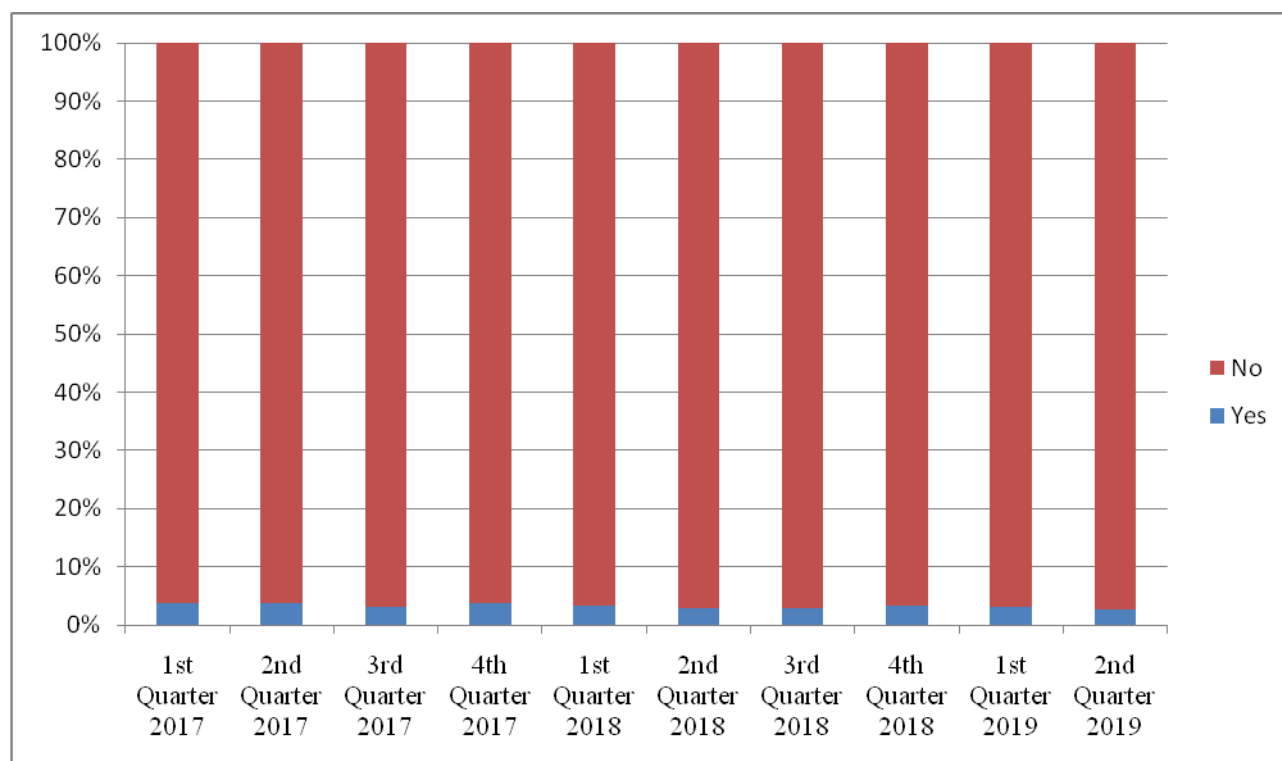


Figure no. 10: Percentage of respondents who wanted to be contacted by an anti-corruption representative

This analysis encounters also some limitations, while in this paper were presented only the statistics of the responses received via text messages and not also the responses received via the web page of the Ministry of Health. Also, due to space limitation tables with percentages for all the studied period were only resumed. Another limitation is given by the lack of results for the September 2017. Future studies might also include other elements of the patients' satisfaction. Another research direction might be the identification of the differences registered between different areas of the country.

Conclusions

The Romanian public health system still faces a series of challenges and has to improve part of its indicators in order to reach the European average. Through the National Strategy part of these topics are being addressed and solution proposed. In order to ensure a higher level of communication and transparency between the main stakeholders and to capture their opinions, the patient's feedback mechanism was implemented starting with 2017 in order to better capture the patients' opinions. The findings of this study identified that the health system is mostly facing an improvement when it comes to patients' satisfaction regarding the doctors activity, a decrease of the informal payments practiced in the hospitals, the quantity of information regarding the diagnose and treatment received at discharge or regarding the necessity to buy medicines or sanitary materials during the hospitalization. Also, the patients seem more and more willing to recommend the hospital where they were treated to friends or acquaintances. By studying the evolution of patients' opinion over these two years and a half period, it has been noticed that only the patients' satisfaction regarding the nurses' activity and implication identified a slightly negative tendency.

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