

The Organization of Public Relations Department at Hospitals: A Model Suggestion

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Abstract

Since health care and service involve all the individuals, hospitals have a special importance among public service institutions. Hospitals undertake significant missions in securing physical and psychological well-being of the society, in short providing public health-care. As for the public relations, it is a series of continuing activities evaluating the attitudes of the target community, developing relations based on mutual cooperation and acceptance, aiming at gaining the respect, affection and sympathy of the target people and establishing a positive image, and thus it is a sine qua non for every corporation. In this context, in our study, the importance and duties of public relations at hospitals are focused on, and a model is developed about the position, status and functioning of public relations at hospitals.

Key Words: Hospitals, Public Relations, Organization, Modelling

1. Introduction

In the world, there has been an unbelievable strong change in the economic, social, cultural, and technological areas. As a result of this change, the corporations and the institutions, of which we are members, have been under the influence of this process. For institutions, this change has become more complicated. Institutions may reorganise their structure in order to keep up with the developments, if necessary. Then, remodelling the functioning becomes a necessity for health institutions as it is for the other public service corporations. Therefore, with the change of worldview, it is required to review public relations within the scope of health organization structure and to address public relations in terms of a more functional pattern.

For health communication, the most important step is to employ public relations experts both at hospitals and within the Ministry of Health, and to establish public relations departments and coordinators and to bring them into force. The studies show that either there is not any public relation department at hospitals and one of the managers tries to carry out the functions of this department, or the staffs dealing with public relations is experts in different areas, and thus, they do not have scientific proficiency in dealing with public relations. This reflects that the significance of public relations is not adequately seized or the value of public relations is not truly esteemed. Public relations department is regarded as an information desk, which brings out the idea that anyone else can perform the task. However, there are tasks such as group communication, communication across institutions, corporational communication, relations with media, social relations, public relations, strategic communication, following the environmental factors, crisis management, activity management, and consultation within the department of public relations. In health sector, to establish public relations department is a must for all institutions. In recent years, it is seen that the Ministry of Health have focused on the subject seriously. Hospitals are still not efficiently satisfying in terms of public relations service. At hospitals, to reach the target community and to supply communication of high quality with them on the basis of respect and sympathy, and thus to establish a positive image, are possible through planned and organized communication studies.

Another misperception about public relations results from the concept “target community”. In public relations, target community are the groups who are directly or indirectly related to the organization. In terms of hospitals, target community is only regarded as “patients” in practice; nevertheless, doctors, nurses, the other staff, and all the public and private sectors (SSI-Social Security Institution) are within the scope of the target community.

So, public relations services must be carried by being in the service of all the groups, individuals and institutions correlating with the hospital.

The establishment of public relations department or, if there is a public relation department, the employment of public relations experts are vital issues for communication in health sector and crisis management. For example, when problematic situations come up because of the transplantation or the other reasons, related hospitals remain incapable of managing crisis and media.

The most significant side of hospitals from the point of public relation is their giving service to all the classes of society and individuals from different ages and sexes; in other words, hospitals are the institutions where all the mentioned masses are directly applying (Seçim et al. 2001:123). Health problem concerns with male and female, young and old, patient and visitor, in short, all the individuals, and is a vital issue demanding to apply to hospitals. Public relations services must be carried everywhere where people exist.

In the classification diagram of Peter M. Blau and W. Richard Scott, “each hospital is stated as a public service institution” (Seçim et al. 2001:123). Following this statement, “patients, who are the target community of hospitals, can not be the decision makers on which kind of treatment service they will get, the quantity and the quality of this treatment and its assessment” (Seçim et al. 2001:123). That is, the patient goes to the hospital to get information on the disease and to be treated. To lead and inform patient himself/herself and accompaniers are significant. During the treatment process, both the patient and the accompaniers should be instructed. It is obvious that accompaniers are getting mentally depressed as well as the patients. So, they need for psychological support. That is, considering that people getting service at hospitals are not healthy, and thus the service to be supplied must be accordingly carried out.

The other feature of hospitals from the point of public relations is their complicated structure. The extremity in the division of labor brings disadvantages as well as advantages (Seçim et al. 2001:123). The division of labor is vital for institutionalisation. In institutions, the maintenance of workflow, the implementation of modern management techniques, and the organization of departments should supply solutions for the problems raising due to a complicated division of labor system.

In terms of civil rights, the high costs of the services at hospitals, the competition between the public service institutions and private sector, raising the awareness of public on the diseases, demand concentration on public relation services heavily. Concordantly, this study aims at answering the raising question, “ why is there a need to re-organize the public relation departments at hospitals?” and following this, the study will suggest a model for public relation department and services for these institutions.

2. Concept, Meaning and Content of “Public Relations”

The related literature offers a wide range of definitions for public relations. Each definition underlines one or some of the points of public relations. With reference to these definitions, it is also possible to determine application areas of public relations. Some of these definitions are presented below:

- Public relations is to develop resonance between target community and institution, and to plan and sustain the efforts to keep this resonance (Dominic,1996:37).
- According to Cutlip, Center, and Broom, public realtions is a management function supplying development and maintenance of relations based on benefit and mutual communication between the institution and target communities which play a fundamental role in the success and failure of an institution(Cutlip et al. 1994:6)
- To the results of Delphi Research Project conducted in Europe in 2000 and presented in the World Public Relations Congress, public relations is “a strategic relations management collecting data based on mutual communication, raising the level of perception and reputation, aiming to gain the trust of public and target communities within public in general” (www.ipranet.org).
- Public relations is “a management function supplying maintenance of relations based on common benefits between an institution and the target communities” (Pohl,1995:1).
- Dilenschneider states that public relations is related to strategic problem solving(Dilenschneider,2000:9)
- Public Relations is an art and conselling social science branch on organizing services on behalf of both institution and target community by doing trend anlyses and estimating the results these trends cause (Wilcox et al. 200:6).

- Public Relations is a process of the profitable integration of new and continuing relations between an institution and partners, and also the management of all the communication activities based on developing and sustaining an institution's brand and reputation(Caywood,1997:XI).
- Public relations is related to utilizing communication in order to develop positive relations between an institution and its target community(Botan,1989:99-110)
- According to Gossen and Sharp, the main role of public relations is to focus on techniques based on conflict resolution (Gossen and Sharp, 2000:35-38).
- Public Relations is the efforts to supply resonance and good-will between the institution and public by performing the planned tasks.
- Public relations are a managerial function supplying the achievement of organizational aims, the identification of organization mission and vision, facilitating the organizational change. Public relations department develops the connection between the external environment and the staff of the organization by bringing the expectations of community and the aims of the organization into consonance and developing positive relations (Baskin et al, 1997- cited in, Tengilimoğlu, Öztürk, 2011:21).

In these definitions, public relations is emphasized as an important factor effecting the success and the failure of an institution as a result of the interaction with social milieu and sense of social responsibility. Moreover, a public relations is stated as a management function covering planned efforts. The strategic side of public relations, which has a wide influence on reputation, perception and problem solving process, is emphasized. The strategic communication counseling role of public relations in analyzing the trends and verifying the threats as a social science is remarked. The brand image of public relations and its function in developing a brand image are pointed. So, public relations is presented as a "win-win" technique between the institution and target community. Public relations hold a mediatory position. To develop relations based on dual-communication, good -will and faith is among the activities of public relations.

Public Relations Society of America sums up the services within the scope of public relations and the aims as such:

1. Public relations involves the programmes prepared by the administrative department of an institution.
2. Public Relations is interested in various public groups within and outside of the institution.
3. Public relations instruct the administrative department in developing policies during the process of image shaping for public opinion and in managing the reputation of the institution.
4. Public relations develops dual-coordination between institution and target community and maintains it .
5. Public relations aims at a change within and outside of the institution by means of effecting opinions, attitudes, and behaviours.
6. Public relations establishes new relations between the institution and target community and sustainsit .

3. The Importance of Public Relations Department at Hospitals

The field of Public Relations and Organizations Services is a significant need for the institutions and organizations. With the changes in worldview, public relations becomes sine qua non for every institution. This condition results in the increase in the number of public relations departments or brings out a need for the establishment of public relations departments in the institutions. In recent years, the major focus of Ministry of health and media on health issues and the rising public awareness, and accordingly, the increasing importance of human health have resulted in an increase in the demand of health services more than ever. Additionally, expectations on the services supplied by hospitals have also increased.

Hospitals are institutions where patients and casualites, the ones doubtful about any disease or those demanding check-up, are examined, treated, put under psychiatric observation, rehabilitated, diagnosed either by being hospitalized or not(Özgen,1995:73). The main function of hospitals is to treat the diseases which are the basic reasons for patients in applying to hospitals. The diseases occur in different organs because of several reasons in human body. The services to treat the diseases are the treatment plans and determined by the physicians and carried out by the doctors and the other staff of the hospital (Alpagun,1981:198). This process is called as patient care. Hospitals are leading institutions among the public utilities giving service to public. Today, as it is in all the sectors, there is a competition between institutions in health sector. Therefore, the impressions and the effects the hospitals will have on their target communities are significant for hospitals to survive. Developing positive impressions and effects can be accomplished through effective public relations services.

Promotional activities in many practices such as to inform the community about the services of non-profit organizations, to attract customers' and promoters' attention, and to bankroll must be consciously carried. Such institutions utilize communication tools in their promotional activities (Akgemci, 2007:470).

Today, in attaining to the targets of public or private hospitals, to have dynamic systems on the basis of clear-intelligible-reliable-dual-communication and to sustain these systems are of importance. Furthermore, all the contacts with the patients must be coordinated by the department of public relations (Colorado Hospitals Guide, 2003:2). In the marketing of health services, the department of public relations has a very active role to develop a positive image on public opinion. The marketing of health services aims at organizing communication programmes to develop a positive perception about the services supplied by the hospital through an effective reputation management (Gümüş, 2005:105). The publicity of the hospital, effects positively the efficiency and performance of the hospital, the satisfaction of the patient, the easier supplement of services, and the patient's hospital adoption (Acuner et al., 2006). Whatever the problem is, patients must be benignly treated and, if necessary, must be pardoned since patients and their problems are the main reason for the existence of medical profession (Oğuz, 1996:42). The implementation of these tasks demands the establishment of public relations departments and coordinatorships and the employment of qualified personnel at hospitals.

There are various research studies for eliciting information on public relations departments at hospitals. These studies cover searching the individual attitudes and perceptions on hospitals; motivation studies based on learning how to motivate the target community and to increase the satisfaction level; research studies based on market research to stabilise the social, economic, and cultural trends which may affect the programme of public relations for hospitals and to study the status of competitors in marketing; research studies based on revealing the reasons of the hospital preferences and the conditions causing these preferences; research studies leading the department of public relations in terms of assignation of the effect of messages through different publicity techniques such as newspapers, magazines, television, brochure etc. and the design of effective messages; researches covering the study how these messages are perceived and lead to positive tendency, what influence the messages sent have on target community and whether the messages are perceived or not; evaluation studies involving the stabilisation of the success of public relations project by changing the positive ideas into attitudes and behaviours in the direction off the planned aims (Bateman, 1998: 11; cited in Yurdakul et al., 2007:31-46).

According to a study, the main factors bringing forth the need of the establishment of public relation departments are listed below (Tengilimoğlu, 2001:29-34):

- The systematical changes in health sector
- The complex structure of hospitals,
- The remarkable specialisation in many fields,
- Language problem and bureaucracy,
- Public unconsciousness and the power of the specialist,
- The changes in the conditions of the patient,
- Professionalisation of hospital management,
- Restrictions on public monetary sources and financial need,

Besides these, there are other factors such as the improvements in the patient rights, information demand, the improvement of mass media, intensifying competition and the increase in the number of private hospitals as well as the number of public ones, the fact of the need for public approval and communication with public for each institution.

4. The Duties and Responsibilities of Public Relations Departments at Hospitals

The duties and responsibilities of public relations unit can be divided into three different groups from the point of management, service and physical setting. (Işık, 2011:37-39)

The Managerial Duties and Responsibilities

Informing the staff about the institutional objectives and policies and providing flow of knowledge and information from top management to staff.

Providing the transfer of information, demands, wishes and complaints of staff to top management by means of formal or informal communication channels.

Organizing seminars, panels, workshops and conferences in order to encourage staff to improve their professional knowledge and skills or encourage them to participate such activities outside their institution.

Organizing in-service training seminars for personnel on the subjects of “communication with patients and patient companions”, “communication skills and body language”, “stress management”, “time management”, “motivation techniques”, “emotional intelligence” and etc. by inviting specialized persons.

Organizing activities, such as trips, picnic or meals to increase the morals and motivation of the staff. Applying questionnaires to determine the viewpoints, wishes, demands and complaints of the staff about the institution.

The Duties and Responsibilities from the Point of Service

- Establishing an information desk to answer the questions of the patients and their companions and to canalize them. Training the personnel working in this unit on the subjects of emotional quotient, effective speaking and listening and empathy.
- Putting complaint boxes and having a phone line via which patients and companions experiencing problems can express their problems. Evaluating the coming complaints and finding solutions to these problems with the hospital management.
- Preparing posters, brochures and etc. for informing and enlightening the patients and companions referring to the hospital.
- Employing a qualified personnel to listen to the demands, wishes, problems and complaints of the patients and to find solutions to these in order not to make the hospital employees busy in vain.
- Establishing an aesthetic web page of the hospital so that every kind of information can be reached easily and in an interactive way.
- Organizing questionnaires, observations or surveys to learn the viewpoints of the target people.
- Organizing questionnaires periodically about “customer satisfaction” of patients and companions.
- Organizing questionnaires about the “hospital image” in the cities, towns and etc. where the hospital is giving service.
- Organizing informative seminars and conferences about public health.

Physical Setting Duties and Responsibilities

- Being sensitive about the physical appearance and hygiene (suitable to health) conditions of the hospital. Encouraging the personnel to be keen and sensitive on this issue.
- Giving special effort to the inner decoration from the point of being aesthetic and relaxing.
- Securing that the inner and outer appearance are suitable to the institutional image.
- Securing that sound and illumination systems are suitable to the quality and service standards.
- Preparing and putting informative and orienting billboards for the patients and companions in suitable places.

5. Organization and Functioning of Public Relations Departments at Hospitals: A Model Suggestion

The importance of departments in institutions varies according to their positions in hierarchy apart from the tasks they especially do. The efficiency and effectiveness of a unit, directly dependent to or under the supervision and observation of a general administrator or undersecretary, are not the same as the effectiveness of a unit under the supervision of a branch chief. The position of the department gains importance in the coordination and communication with other units, in the solution about conflicts arisen or to arise, and in the fulfilment of the orders. Some factors have importance and affect in the determination of the position of public relations department in the institution. These factors can be listed as the historical development, the problems encountered, functioning field, and personality of the responsible personnel and the personality of the other managers (Ertekin, 2000, cited in Geçikli, 2010:67). Besides, the size of the institution, the quality of the product and service and the objectives of the institutions are also important elements.

On the other hand, there is the leadership aspect of managing a public relations department, consultancy or branch. Counsellors have an important place at present. Because whether as a department within the institution or as a consultancy, the conduction of campaigns and other tasks efficiently is vital. For this reason. The position of public relations practitioner within the institution is significant in respect to managerial status. Public relations practitioner is the counsellor of the directors of board in many big companies where public relations play an important part.

What is more important is that this is the right functioning for the companies experiencing a crisis or has successfully evaded a crisis. In addition to its own department management, public relations manager also has managerial role with the other department managers. S/he should participate policy making decisions, be informed about secret information, and thus, get engaged in new developments at the possible earliest phase.

S/he should attend every meeting to discuss all issues about the institution. This is because public relations manager had better know what is going on in the institution more than the others and feel responsible for making suggestions on every matter (Jefkins, 1983:27)

When all these factors are considered, it is beneficial that public relations department should have a close position to the top management in the hierarchical structure. A top manager supervising the general policy of the institution should feel the public relations service close to himself as it contributes to this general policy. Nevertheless, public relations departments may have different positions according to various organization forms (Ertekin, 2000, cited in Geçikli, 2010:67).

According to Silver, institutions may choose one of five different alternatives in carrying out the public relations activities:

- Public relations responsibility may be given to one who is not a PR specialist.
- A public relations practitioner can be employed.
- Institution can buy service from outside PR firms.
- It may cooperate with a PR expert working freely.
- One or some of above mentioned alternatives can be used together (Silver, 1995:159).

As for Seçim and Coşkun, public relations activities can be mainly organized in three forms in the institutions (Geçikli, 2010:70)

- Public relations activities can be appointed, as an additional task, to one or some of the employees working in the institution. This person is usually one of the top managers, and this condition is generally seen in small companies.
- The practises related to PR can be carried out by a consultancy office out of the institution. Some activities necessitating keen and serious effort, such as opening ceremonies, celebrations, organizing the programs of foreign visitors, organizing international meetings or conventions and etc. can be given to such consultancy officies. Besides, organizations can work together with a specialist from consultancy firms, but they should know the practice well, and behave objectively.
- A PR unit (or department) that searches, programs and carry out other activities can be established in the institution, or PR units having different sizes and functions can be formed to carry out the duties by means of a team work.

When hospitals are considered, the best is to establish a coordination unit or department directly responsible to the top manager. As seen in Figure 1, a specialist in PR directly responsible to head physician should follow the coordination with different departments employing specialized PR practitioners directly dependent to him/her.

As shown in Figure 1(below), PR organization diagram at hospitals can be formed as subunits consisting of strategical PR, corporational PR, corporational PR directed to external world, and an officer in charge of coordination, all of whom are dependent to head physician. Every unit has its own duties. Strategical PR officer carries out researches towards all PR practices, makes policies, realizes the planning, and evaluates these policies and plans by applying them. Besides, problem and crisis management, and crisis communication can be under his/her responsibility. Problem management is the process of determining the problems at hospital, analyzing them, listing them according to priority, choosing the strategy program, putting them into practice and evaluating the results.

Problem management is also called pre-crisis planning. On the other side, crises are the events which appear at an unexpected time, make the perception and preventive systems of the hospital insufficient, create stress and anxiety on the staff, cause the improverishment of the hospital image .All these should be solved in a short time. Crises appearing during an organ transplantation and epidemics can be given as example for such crises. Image and reputation management are also considered within the context of strategical PR. In both of them, forming the image of the hospital, strengthening and protecting it are the objectives.

It is the duty of strategic PR to manage the image formed as a result of the faith, idea, feeling and impressions of the people about the hospital, and to form an image within a time by means of certain communication programs and means which are devised well.

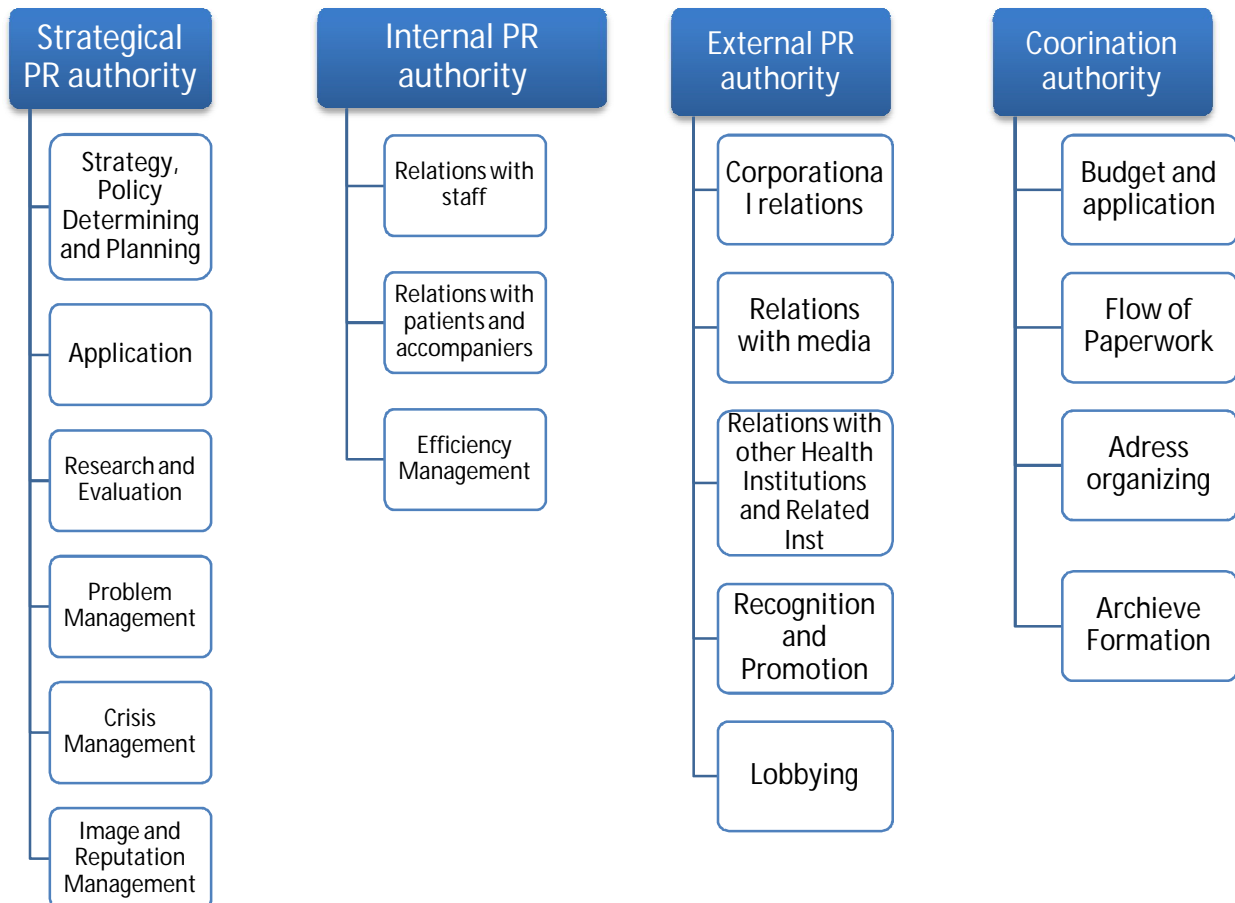
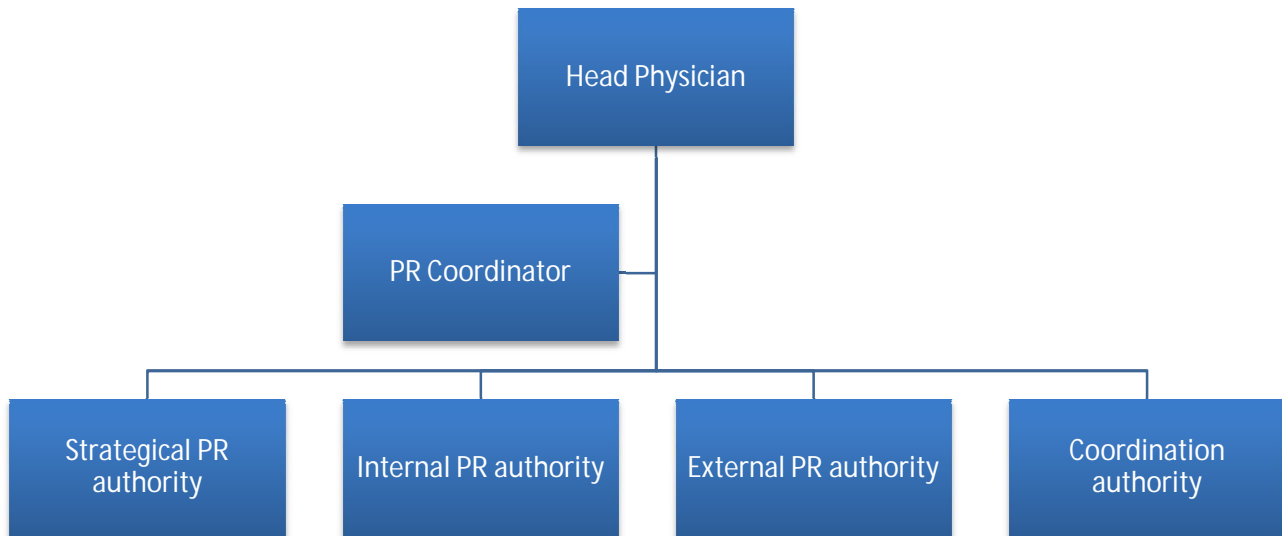


Figure.1: The Organizational Structure of Public Relations Department at Hospitals

Another subunit is the internal-corporational PR unit. Internal corporational PR comes forth about the relations related to the target people within the corporation. It is the whole of activities realized by securing the manager-employee, employee-employee communication relations and forming sympathy, affection and trust towards corporation.

It seems really difficult for a firm to be successful in its external relations without managing its internal relations well. From the point of view of hospitals, when manager-physician-nurse and other personnel make collaboration, an effective team work appears. Demands, wishes, complaints and expectations of the staff should be taken into consideration, they must be considered as people having feelings, and thus an empathy should be established, and the strategy should be determined according to these factors.

Besides, organizing seminars, panels, conferences, personnel training activities, workshops, and taking private affairs into account are all within the duties of internal PR.

When psychological mood and expectations of patients and companions who are the target people of hospitals are considered in comparison with other institutions, the great difference between them can be seen clearly. The patients and companions referring to hospitals are in a mood of stress with the feelings of sorrow, anxiety, and fear, and thus, they can exhibit rather different behaviours and attitudes from healthy people. In this context, relations management in institutions giving health services gains high importance.

Public relations practices out of the institution comprises institutional efforts to undertake the activities of establishing communication with people, developing relations with press and visual media, and media management. It is necessary to follow whether the hospital is reflected positively or negatively in news on television, radio or written press. As hospitals are the institutions where every section of the society gets service, every kind of news about public health is released, the results of accidents with injuries or mortals are announced, public or press announcements about related events are made, and they should keep their relations with mass media at the top level (Canöz, 2010:43). Wrong or incomplete news especially about epidemics, organ transplantations, diseases of top level statesmen, accidents with mortalities, malpractices or injuries and etc. may create indignation in the society. Public relations units at hospitals can prevent such unwanted events through complete and correct announces.

The other target people of hospitals are the drug firms and the manufactures or sellers of medical instruments. The operations towards these target people are usually carried out by external public relations unit. Gathering information about the education level, cultural structure, age, sex, and demographic information of the people where the hospital is situated, which diseases are more common in the area, the structure and functioning of the hospital, are among the duties of external public relations unit. In addition to these duties, informing the staff and the target people without creating any suspicion, and promotion of the hospital and lobbying activities are also carried out by external PR unit.

The duties of person in charge of coordination comprises the budgeting and its usage, flow of paperwork, achieving and keeping address registers in addition to the coordination between departments.

V. Conclusion

The service quality of the hospitals is one of the most important indicators of socia-economic development of countries. The main objective of the hospital services is to give the health services to society in the quality and time that citizens demand with the possible lowest cost, with easiness and problem solving, listening the parties, and thinking events as human-centered. Although there have been significant improvements recently, hospitals are still seen the most problematic service institutions from the point of target people's satisfaction. Health service aims at improving the welfare and happiness of the society by protecting, improving and sustaining the health of mankind physically, psychologically and socially. Rapid changes in technology, developments in communication means, increase in the income levels, consciousness of human and patients, increase in the complaints and expectations of the patients have caused health services to become more complex. Under these circumstances, it is necessary that such institutions undertaking important tasks should give great importance to PR practices and reorganize their PR departments.

At present most of the developed institutions have PR coordination offices or departments. Besides, they sometimes get help from PR consultant agencies to carry out their PR activities. Big hospitals are, especially, complex organizations.

In such organizations, providing internal and external communication effectively, gaining a strategic point of view, determining a policy and planning, performing them, making research and efficiency measurements, relations with mass media, problem and crisis management, organizational relations, staff relations, lobbying, promotion and recognition studies, achieving, keeping and registering addresses are all realized in the PR coordination offices. PR is a sine qua non for hospital administrators.

Thus, it is inevitable for a functioning organization structure to have a PR coordination unit/department as presented in the model where specialist personnel dependent directly to top manager are hired.

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