

Supporting a safety culture

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Adverse events and near misses go unreported for many reasons, including a fear of blame and the potential for litigation. Clinical risk management is an integrated process, based on risk identification, analysis and control of events, carried out within a 'blame-free' environment. Data collected from these episodes should be collated and learnt both institutionally and by uploading to a national database. Doctors should be familiar with the systems that operate within their own working environment. Complaints from a patient or carer often highlight a problem that, when analysed, provides opportunities for reducing adverse events. Knowing how to manage complaints is an important part of providing better health care. There is wide acceptance for the need for complaints to be made easily and effectively, such that now more and more patient advocacy units provide a range of options for resolving complaints, including the provision of information and mediation and the setting up of conciliation meetings between the parties. Such risk management is complex and involves multiple domains, including operational, legal and financial issues. For the purpose of this chapter the focus is on clinical risk, benchmarking and incident reporting. Most medical care entails some level of risk to the patient, either from the underlying condition or comorbidity or from the treatment itself, each of which may lead to recognised complications or side effects. These episodes must be differentiated from patient safety incidents, which have been described as preventable events or circumstances that did or could result in unnecessary harm to a patient. These include adverse events that result in actual harm, near-miss events that by chance or intervention cause no harm and no-harm events that reach a patient but result in no harm because of chance or other mitigating circumstance. The most frequent contributing factors that lead to patient safety incidents are listed in Table 15.1. Of these, inadequate communication between healthcare staff, or between medical staff and their patients or family members, ranks highest in frequency.

Revision #1

Created 2025-12-31 15:09:37 UTC by Omar Ayman

Updated 2025-12-31 15:09:37 UTC by Omar Ayman