

Managing errors in the eye unit



Larry Benjamin
Consultant
Ophthalmologist:
Stoke Mandeville
Hospital, Aylesbury,
UK.



David Yorston
Consultant
Ophthalmologist:
Tennent Institute of
Ophthalmology,
Gartnavel Hospital,
Glasgow, Scotland,
UK.



John Buchan
Consultant
Ophthalmologist:
International Centre
for Eye Health,
London School of
Hygiene and Tropical
Medicine, UK.

It takes a team to deliver eye care. When things go wrong, it is important to focus on the patient and to learn from the error while working supportively with the health professionals involved.



Caring for the patient is the main responsibility of an eye health worker, especially if something has gone wrong. MALAWI

No-one working in eye care wants to make a mistake. To protect our patients, it is vital that we anticipate problems and develop systems that minimise risk, such as the WHO Guidelines on Safe Surgery and the WHO Surgical Safety Checklist.¹

If something goes wrong, however, we have three main responsibilities:

- Care for the patient.** Be honest, tell them that something has gone wrong (p. 21) and provide appropriate care.
- Support the health worker involved** (including training).
- Learn from the error**, so it does not happen again.

1. Care for the patient

Ensure that harm to the patient is minimised

For instance, contact the patient immediately if you find out that there has been a drug error. Find out whether the patient has been harmed, and deal with any consequences of the error.

As an example, if you discover that a dilution error has occurred in the preparation of antibiotics for an intra-ocular injection, immediately contact all the patients involved to see if they are symptomatic. Offer to examine them and treat any adverse reactions.

Apologise to the patient(s)

Never be afraid to apologise to the patient(s) concerned. This is not an admission of liability, but an expression of sympathy, and most people would expect it (p. 21).

Avoid cover-ups and promote a 'no blame' culture

It is very important for managers and senior colleagues to promote a culture of openness and transparency, free from fear of blame or retribution, so that issues can be openly discussed and a way forward found.

A 'no blame' culture (see panel on p. 27) means that staff members feel free to report incidents immediately, rather than covering them up until more harm is caused.

2. Support the health workers involved

Most health workers will be deeply affected by their involvement in an event that harms a patient. They are sometimes referred to as the 'second victims' of medical errors, as involvement in a medical error can lead to a loss of confidence, and they may even leave the profession. We cannot afford to lose skilled health workers, so it is important that they are rehabilitated as well.

Include health workers in the process of patient recall, assessment and treatment

Health workers benefit when their involvement with a patient continues after an error is discovered, e.g., by arranging an appointment and examining them, as it gives them an opportunity to do something positive for the patient. By asking the health worker to remain involved, you are showing that you still have confidence



From the field

Medical errors in Brazil

Joao Furtado
Department of Ophthalmology, University of São Paulo, Brazil

When there is an error, we are required to tell patients the truth, in a language they will understand. We also have to provide eye care free of charge for the related problems.

Everything about the patient's treatment (steps, procedures and medication) is recorded in the medical notes. If there is an error, the head of surgical care and the chief nurse would be notified, and an internal investigation would take place. This investigation would determine suggestions to prevent it from happening again (e.g., training or the development of a checklist).