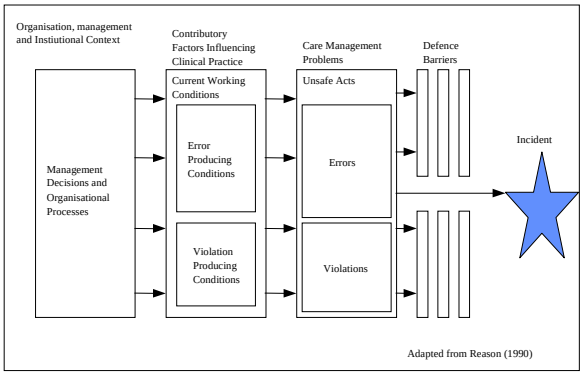
Case Analysis - A Window onto the Healthcare System

Case analysis can be used to understand many aspects of the process of healthcare. Our approach systematically explores the wider healthcare system. It derives from Reason's model of organisational accidents.



This `system' approach emphasises that:

- Human performance is strongly influenced by many contributory factors
- Understanding these factors is the key to improving safety and quality of care

Essential concepts

Care Management Problems (CMPs)

CMPs are problems that arise in the process of care, usually actions or omissions by members of staff. Several CMPs may be involved in one incident. They have two essential features:

- Care deviated beyond safe limits of practice
- The deviation had at least a potential direct or indirect effect on the eventual adverse outcome for the patient.

Examples of CMPs are:

- Failure to monitor, observe or act
- Incorrect (with hindsight) decision
- Not seeking help when necessary
- Wrong treatment given

Clinical Context

Salient clinical events or condition of the patient at the time of the CMP (e.g. bleeding heavily, blood pressure falling; patient very distressed; unable to understand instructions). The essential background information required to understand the clinical context of the CMP.

Contributory Factors

Many factors (see Framework below) may contribute to a single CMP. For example:

- Individual factors may include lack of knowledge or experience of particular staff
- Task factors might include the non-availability of test results or protocols
- Team factors might include poor communication between staff.
- Work environment might include high workload or inadequate staffing.

Specific or General Contributory Factor?

Each contributory factor may be specific to that incident or, more importantly, may reflect more general problems on the unit. For example:

- A lack of knowledge shown may imply that a staff member requires additional training.

- An instance of poor communication may reflect more general problems within the unit.

Framework of Contributory Factors

Patient factors
- Condition (complexity & seriousness)
- Language and communication
- Personality and social factors

Task factors
- Task design and clarity of structure
- Availability and use of protocols
- Availability and accuracy of test results

Individual factors
- Knowledge, skills & competence
- Motivation & attitude
- Physical and mental health

Team factors
- Verbal & written communication
- Supervision and seeking help
- Team structure & leadership

Working conditions
- Staffing levels, skills mix and workload
- Availability and maintenance of equipment
- Administrative and managerial support

Organisation and management
- Financial resources & organisational structure
- Policy standards and goals
- Safety culture and priorities

Institutional context
- Economic and regulatory context
- Health policy and political context