

Position statement

Risk management

Preamble

Clinical errors occur commonly in hospitals. The potential for harm in anaesthesia is great because of the physiological trespass associated with surgery and the nature of the work. An understanding of risk management is essential to practice safely¹. Risk management is defined as the culture, processes and structures that are directed towards the effective management of potential opportunities and adverse effects¹.

A clinical error can be defined as an unintended deviation from management that may or may not lead to an adverse event. An error requires both an active deviation from intended practice and the simultaneous context that allows this to occur¹. Risk management provides a framework to analyse processes and situations with the intent of either minimising the potential for risk or maximising the practitioner's awareness of the risk prior to an adverse event. This enables contingent actions to be planned, rehearsed and implemented – to mitigate adverse impacts.

Risk management and continuous quality improvement are interrelated concepts in the context of health services and patient safety. Applying these concepts is good professional practice.

Cultural changes

Risk management is applicable to any process or situation where a level of risk exposure is high or the potential consequences are significant. Risks include, but are not limited to:

- Patient safety.
- Physical safety of colleagues and staff.
- Property or asset damage.
- Adverse media reporting.
- Financial loss.
- Patient and or family dissatisfaction.
- Corporate reputation.

Risk management is most effective when it is embedded culturally such as the use of a team approach for mutual support. Good risk management means anaesthetists:

- Comprehend and practise the process of risk analysis.
- Communicate effectively and frequently with their team and patients.
- Use documented standard procedures and check lists.
- Record events and incidents routinely to maintain reliable databases.
- Adopt an open disclosure 'no blame' culture.
- Perform routine clinical audits, investigate complaints, mortality and morbidity reports.
- Maintain contingency plans.
- Regularly rehearse plans and procedures.
- Implement and evaluate quality improvement initiatives through education, training and competency assessments.

Benefits of risk management

1. Promotes the safest and highest quality of care for patients.
2. Provides an 'outcomes' focussed healthcare system rewarding creativity, innovation and safety.
3. Reduces the opportunities for litigation.
4. Reduces occupational stress.
5. Reassures patients and the public thereby reducing pain, suffering and anxiety.
6. Improves the defensibility of any claim.

Principles

These principles of risk management need to be adapted to be contextually relevant.

Every clinical or administrative process may have some latent inherent risk. Often the front-line operator may be best placed to conduct a risk assessment. This involves identifying opportunities as much as mitigating or avoiding adverse outcomes.

The role of the anaesthetist includes managing risk. This includes risk assessment, communication and working in teams to mitigate, contain, control and avoid risks.

Application of risk management

Risk assessment starts with determining the context of the situation or circumstances. This includes consideration of geographical location, staff and equipment available, provisions for continuity of care, back up or transfer contingency plans. Potential risks may be identified by asking what, how and when on the background of one's own scope of practice and experience.

Each identified risk has a different likelihood and consequence – combined these may have minimal or catastrophic effect.

Assess risks by priority of impact. Focus first on those risks with the most severe impact.

Decide on a treatment option that is appropriate for the context.

Conclusion

Clinical risk management is part of the anaesthesia safety culture involving a multidisciplinary, systems approach that aims to identify potential risks or opportunities, adopt and implement mitigating strategies and critically evaluate through practice audit and reporting.

Reference

1. Luoma, A.M.V; Wilson, S.R. Clinical risk management for anaesthetists. *Contin Educ Anaesth Crit Care Pain* 2015; 15 (1): 14-19. doi: 10.1093/bjaceaccp/mku003

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