

Professor Mary Dixon-Woods

Risky business: reasoning and identity practices in patient safety



Patient safety interventions are increasingly aimed at deep change in organisations. An understanding of how staff identify, classify and narrativise the causes and proper solutions to patient safety risks is important in indicating

how interventions might succeed in effecting change. In this paper we describe an ethnographic study of four medical wards in hospitals that were participating in the Health Foundation's *Safer Patients Initiative*, an organisation-wide patient safety improvement programme. Data analysis of observations and interviews was based on the constant comparative method. We found that staff were routinely engaged in making sense of, and rationalising, the formal and informal practices in which they were engaged. Staff oriented to risks in the context of busy and complex ward environments, which influenced how they accounted for risk both discursively and practically. They engaged in practices of determining what gets to count as a risk, how such risks should properly be managed, and how to account for what they have done. Staff practices and reasoning in relation to risk emerged through their practical engagement in the everyday work of the wards, but were also shaped by social imperatives. Risks, in the environment

we studied, were not simply risks to patient safety; when things went wrong, professional identity was at risk too. These ways of identifying, evaluating and addressing risks are likely to be highly influential in staff responses to efforts to effect change, and highlight the challenges in designing and implementing patient safety interventions.

Mary Dixon-Woods is Professor of Medical Sociology at the University of Leicester, where she leads the Social Science Research Group in the Department of Health Sciences. A graduate of Dublin City University, Trinity College Dublin, and Oxford University, her programme of research is focused on the application of social science method and theory to important questions in health and health care. She has particular interests in sociological approaches to quality and safety in healthcare, regulation of health professionals, bioethics, and childhood illness. She has also been involved in the development of methods for inclusion of qualitative research in evidence syntheses. The work presented in this paper is based on an evaluation of the Health Foundation's Safer Patients Initiative.

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