An exploration of the implementation of open disclosure of adverse events in the UK: a scoping review and qualitative exploration

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Declared competing interests of authors: David Roberts has declared a competing interest. Capsticks LLP acts on behalf of, and so has a financial relationship with, a number of organisations who participated in this research.

Published July 2014  
DOI: 10.3310/hsdr02200

Plain English summary

Exploration of open disclosure of adverse events in the UK  
Health Services and Delivery Research 2014; Vol. 2: No. 20  
DOI: 10.3310/hsdr02200  

NIHR Journals Library www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk
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Open disclosure of adverse events, in terms of health care, refers to the practice of telling people if they have been harmed by a mistake when receiving care. In 2009, the National Patient Safety Agency relaunched its Being Open framework to support open disclosure in the UK. We explored how this guidance has been received, combining the literature on open disclosure with findings from interviews. We reviewed the international literature on open disclosure since 1980, identifying over 600 papers, predominantly from the last 12 years. Simultaneously, we conducted 86 interviews with respondents from a range of stakeholder groups, including policy-makers, health professionals, NHS managers, representatives from professional bodies and patients. Evidence from both the literature and the interviews showed that the principle of truthfulness was widely supported but not always upheld. Many factors seem to create uncertainties over what should be disclosed, by whom, when and how. Being honest and open about mistakes is theoretically supported but seems considerably more difficult in practice. In conclusion, the evidence suggests that open disclosure should be a process and not a one-off event as it is often described. Open disclosure should be a conversation whereby information is shared and the patient is both listened to and responded to. The key message from this report seems to be that while open disclosure is widely regarded as the right thing to do, creating a culture of openness remains challenging, yet necessary, if patients are to be involved effectively in all aspects of their care.
Health Services and Delivery Research

ISSN 2050-4349 (Print)
ISSN 2050-4357 (Online)

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This report

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the HS&DR programme or one of its proceeding programmes as project number 10/1007/47. The contractual start date was in September 2011. The final report began editorial review in March 2013 and was accepted for publication in October 2013. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The HS&DR editors and production house have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors' report and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the final report document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this report.

This report presents independent research funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR). The views and opinions expressed by authors in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the HS&DR programme or the Department of Health. If there are verbatim quotations included in this publication the views and opinions expressed by the interviewees are those of the interviewees and do not necessarily reflect those of the authors, those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the HS&DR programme or the Department of Health.

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