A realist analysis of hospital patient safety in Wales: applied learning for alternative contexts from a multisite case study

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Declared competing interests of authors: none

Disclaimer: This report contains transcripts of interviews conducted in the course of the research, or similar, and contains language that may offend some readers.

Published September 2015
DOI: 10.3310/hsdr03400

Plain English summary

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Health Services and Delivery Research 2015; Vol. 3: No. 40
DOI: 10.3310/hsdr03400

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Plain English summary

The safety of patients in British hospitals is a major social problem because 1 in 10 is harmed during his or her care. UK policy responses focus on new improvement programmes to implement multiple ‘evidence-based’ interventions, such as checklists of what should be done during surgery. Such interventions are tested on a small scale (e.g. in one operating theatre) before being rolled out more widely.

Although it is known that the success of the programmes varies among hospitals, it is not known why. This is the first study to examine how the ‘contextual’ features of a hospital (e.g. its size) and its environment (e.g. political values) combine to influence patient safety programmes. Our study had two main parts. First, we developed a new model for analysing the implementation of improvement programmes that directs attention to multiple layers of context. Second, we used our model to conduct seven in-depth case studies of the 1000 Lives+ patient safety programme across Wales. The main source of our information was 160 interviews, supplemented by our archive of nearly 2000 documents, and the observation of practice.

Our findings show how, for specified programme interventions (e.g. surgical checklists), hospital and environmental features combine to derive varied outcomes seen as either more or less successful by stakeholders such as public, professionals, researchers and policy-makers. Our model and findings provide a valuable basis from which stakeholders can (a) better understand existing improvement programmes and (b) design more effective ones in the future.
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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 preceding programmes as project number 10/1007/06. The contractual start date was in October 2011. The final report began editorial review in April 2014 and was accepted for publication in January 2015. 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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