

Quality and safety between ward and board: a biography of artefacts study

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Plain English summary

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Plain English summary

There have been concerns about the quality and safety of NHS hospital services since 2000. A series of government policies and official reports has argued that doctors, nurses and hospital managers have not had enough information about the quality and safety of services in their hospitals. As a result, problems developed on wards and in other parts of hospitals, and had got out of hand before decisive action was taken to address them.

Our study tested the idea that hospital staff can spot problems quickly if they have access to better information and can make sure that patients are not harmed. Hospitals have been implementing computer systems to provide this information.

We undertook two initial surveys, and then a detailed study of the uses of quality and safety data, in four acute NHS hospitals. The detailed study included observation of the ways in which nurses and other staff use information in the course of their work. It also involved observing meetings during which hospital managers discussed the quality and safety of services, and undertaking interviews with hospital staff who collect and use information.

We found that staff on wards had detailed information about patients that they could use to make sure that those patients were receiving the care they needed. Senior hospital managers had access to information about the quality and safety of services across their hospitals, which they used to identify areas in which problems might be developing. Equally, we found that trust information systems tended to be fragmented, and trusts were required to collect data for national agencies ahead of the information that they needed to collect for their own needs.

These changes were made as part of a broader set of initiatives to improve the quality and safety of services. Our evidence suggests that better information, along with these broader changes, has led to measurable improvements in the quality and safety of services at the four hospitals studied.

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