Root Cause Analysis Investigation Tools

Investigative interview guidance (cognitive type interview): taking a first-hand account of individuals’ involvement in a patient safety incident

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Investigative interview guidance (cognitive type interview): taking a first-hand account of individuals’ involvement in a patient safety incident

An investigative interview is designed to help interviewees retrieve from memory the events associated with a patient safety incident.

A cognitive interview is an interviewing technique based on psychological theory and research for examining the retrieval of information from memory.\(^1\)

The interview style recommended for Root Cause Analysis (RCA) investigations is a modified approach of the formal cognitive interview. It involves actively listening to someone who recalls their first-hand account of an event they have either witnessed, or been involved in, as soon after it has happened as possible.

**Preparation**

Listening to the first-hand accounts from those involved in an incident as soon as possible after it has happened will help the investigation team start to build a picture of what happened and potentially highlight what other information will be required. The optimum time for holding an interview is between two\(^1\) and 72 hours after the incident.\(^2\)

The interviewer needs to establish who they want to interview and make arrangements to do so as soon as possible. The identified staff should be invited to attend; told the purpose of the interview; what to expect; and what preparation they need to do. It is essential that the interviewer and the room are prepared prior to the interview.

**Inviting the member of staff to attend for an interview**

Where appropriate, a written invitation to the interview can be provided and the details below included. Where this is not practical due to the need to see staff as soon as possible after the incident, staff should be advised in advance and be given the following information verbally:

- the purpose of the interview and details of the incident being investigated;
- the time, place and estimated length of the interview;
- who will be conducting the interview and their role;
- how the cognitive interview will be conducted and the first-hand account recorded (e.g. the interview will be informal, notes will be taken to inform the investigation, but these will not act as a formal witness statement and do not need the interviewee’s signature);
- what documentary evidence will be available to them during the interview;
- the fact that they can bring a friend or colleague for support (explanations need to be given regarding the role of this friend/colleague e.g. confidentiality, their involvement);
- advice on what will happen after the interview.

**Interviewer preparation**

- The interview should take place in a quiet, relaxed setting and, if possible, away from the interviewee’s usual place of work and not at the scene of the incident.
- The room should be set out informally with refreshments available and steps taken to ensure, where possible, no interruptions occur (e.g. telephones, beeps).
- Where possible, the interviewee should have the opportunity to attend the interview in work time and arrangements may need to be made with their line manager to ensure this.
- Depending on the nature of the case or the interviewee’s personal involvement, they may find the process of recounting the events either upsetting or disturbing. The interviewer will need to have information available on staff support/counselling.
- The interviewer should ensure they have all the relevant documentation available at the interview.

It is important to remember in the cognitive interview to only interview one staff member at once.
Conducting the interview

Introductions (where appropriate) should be made of those present in the room. Include details on roles and an explanation of the sequence of the interview and approximate length. The RCA process should be explained and an estimate given of how long it will take to complete.

It is important to reinforce that this is not part of a disciplinary process. The interviewer should explain that notes will be taken throughout, for the purpose of informing the investigation. It must be stressed that these notes will not act as a formal witness statement and therefore do not need the interviewee’s signature.

If, following the interview, the interviewer feels that the individual staff member should write a formal statement, guidance and support should be given by a union representative or trust solicitor as applicable.

The interviewee should be asked to confirm they have understood all of the above and should be reminded that they should offer only factual information, but include everything regardless of whether they think it is relevant or not. The interviewee should be discouraged from making ‘off the record comments’. The interviewee should also be advised that the first-hand account and the final report will be written with due anonymity to staff and the patient.

NPSA cognitive interviewing process

For detailed guidance on the NPSA cognitive interviewing process, go to: www.msnpsa.nhs.uk/catoolkit/resources/word_docs/Guidance/Guidance_Undertaking_an_Investigative_Interview.doc

Completion of the interview

On completion, the interviewer should ensure the interviewee feels appropriately supported and that any further support required is organised. The interviewer should reconfirm what will happen with the information gained from the interview and how this will be used in the RCA process.

1 The cognitive interview is based on work undertaken by two American cognitive psychologists, Ed Geiselman and Ron Fisher. For more information: R Milne, R Bull (1999), Investigative Interviewing – Psychology and Practice. Wiley, Chichester