

## Speaking Up to Save Lives

It is important for clinicians to speak up and say something if they witness a risky patient safety issue in order to prevent errors and “adverse patient outcomes.” Unsafe practices include:

- Potentially unsafe order or treatment
- Possible missed diagnosis
- Questionable clinical judgment
- Not following the rules
- Dangerous shortcuts
- Incompetency
- Disrespect

It can be difficult for a person to voice their concern about a patient safety issue as this often puts the accused on the defensive. They may receive a negative response, be ignored, or told that their concerns are unwarranted. The following table outlines factors that influence a clinician’s ability or desire to speak up.

Influencing Factor	Barriers to Speaking Up
<b>Perceived Effectiveness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unresponsive or unsupportive management                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ No investigation or actions taken to address concern</li> <li>○ No transparency or follow-up</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Motivation to Speak Up</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low index of suspicion</li> <li>• Low perceived patient harm</li> <li>• Feeling helpless, intimidated</li> <li>• Tolerance of risk</li> <li>• No social support</li> <li>• Speaking up is not an obligation</li> </ul>
<b>Clinical Factors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uncertainty about the clinical situation or risk of patient harm</li> </ul>
<b>Individual Factors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distracted, inattentive</li> <li>• Experienced prior retaliation and disrespect</li> <li>• Poor coping skills</li> <li>• Unassertive, low confidence</li> <li>• Insufficient knowledge and skills</li> <li>• Fear of disrupting colleague relationships</li> </ul>
<b>General Factors</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rushed at work</li> <li>• Complicated reporting procedure</li> <li>• No teamwork</li> <li>• No policy to speak up</li> <li>• No procedure for conflict resolution around patient safety</li> </ul>
<b>Perceived safety to speak up</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceived unsafe work setting                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Culture of blame</li> <li>○ No support from manager or coworkers</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Training</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No training provided on patient safety or communication strategies</li> </ul>

### References

1. Institute for Safe Medication Practices. (2019). *Nurse Advise-ERR*. Retrieved from Institute for Safe Medication Practices: <http://www.ismp.org/newsletters/nursing/issues/NurseAdviseERR201911.pdf>

The following summarizes the factors that enhance speaking up behaviors.

- Perception that speaking up is effective and supported by management/administration
- Motivation or feelings of moral obligation to speak up, high index of suspicion, high perceived risk of patient harm, and unambiguous patient scenario
- High job satisfaction, situational awareness, confidence and strong communication skills
- Effective teamwork; simple processes in place to resolve conflicts
- Sense of safe work setting and supportive management
- Training is provided regularly with standardized communication tools for reporting such as SBAR – situation, background, assessment and recommendation
- Data is collected on voiced safety concerns and analyzed

Clinicians should feel confident to speak up about patient safety concerns. Individual characteristics and behaviors that support speaking up include:

- Verbalizes complaints: corrects the situation promptly but also notifies managers when the system fails
- Coaches colleagues: points out risks in peers' behaviors, irrespective of actual patient harm and suggests safer practices; reports actions for learning purposes only
- Questions current process issues and reports them to management to be corrected
- Clarifies all potentially unsafe orders with prescriber
- Informs others when they have made an error, for learning purposes only
- Takes ownership of mistakes they make themselves and notifies managers so all can learn; open to others pointing out their mistakes
- Seeks opportunities for improvement and asks why things are done a certain way

For managers and administrators to be successful in supporting their staff to speak up they need to be extremely mindful. Mindfulness is a characteristic of institutions with highly reliable outcomes. It is the ongoing preoccupation with failure and acknowledging the possibility of error even with well-designed processes. Administrators worry about system failures and human errors and are wary of complacency. They expect and support their staff to speak up when they are concerned about safety issues.

#### References

1. Institute for Safe Medication Practices. (2019). *Nurse Advise-ERR*. Retrieved from Institute for Safe Medication Practices: <http://www.ismp.org/newsletters/nursing/issues/NurseAdviseERR201911.pdf>