Exploring health professionals’ responses to patient-raised complaints: A qualitative interview study and theoretical analysis using the Theoretical Domains Framework and COM-B

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About the study

Healthcare complaints can be used to improve healthcare service quality.

Healthcare professionals’ (HCPs) initial responses to complaints can significantly influence the course of a complaint, but sparse research has examined what influences these behaviours. Understanding these influences on HCPs’ responses can support effective complaint handling.

Research aim: To explore HCP and service user (patient and carer) views on complaints’ handling and the perceived factors influencing responses to complaints by applying a behavioural science approach.

Recommendations

• Provide training to HCPs to improve communication skills around complaints, such as active listening skills.

• Differentiate between formal and informal complaints and increase health professionals’ knowledge and skills in understanding and managing both types of complaints.

• Support organisations to transition to electronic systems or improve the usability of such systems to allow HCPs to easily access patient information relevant to a complaint.

• Facilitate regular safe spaces for HCPs to discuss complaints, emotions associated with them and potential learnings.

• Address organisational defensiveness and blame culture. Reframe organisational narratives around the meaning of complaints as ‘patient feedback’.

Method

Design: Semi-structured interviews with HCPs and service users

Participants: N=18
- 11 HCPs working in NHS secondary or tertiary settings (e.g., hospitals) with complaints handling experience within the last 10 years.
- 7 service users (3 patients and 4 carers) who had raised a verbal or written complaint in NHS hospitals within the last 10 years.

Analysis
- Thematic analysis.1
- Deductive mapping onto COM-B dimensions 2 and the more granular Theoretical Domains Framework (TDF).3

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Key Findings (with TDF/COM-B analysis)

- Patients and carers valued receiving an apology from the HCP or service provider, and an assurance that care quality would improve (Skills/Psychological Capability).

- HCPs indicated a lack of knowledge around formal vs informal procedures (Knowledge/Psychological Capability)

- HCPs, patients and carers pointed to lack of time and human resources to investigate complaints and to assess patients’ expectations from complaints (Environmental context and resources/Physical opportunity).

- HCPs highlighted strong support systems and open discussions as part of positive organisational cultures regarding complaints (Social influences/Social opportunity).

“Most important part of that is listening. We need to listen to the patients and relatives around the experiences and stories that they’re telling us, so I think that’s one of the key skills that a complaints handler needs to have.” (HCP 3)

“It probably is a time and resource... I’m sure though that there are things that could be done for sure, a specific person just for staff support within a complaints team [...] but it comes back to time and money.” (HCP 7, Complaints Manager)

“There’s something about valuing, genuinely valuing complaints as an opportunity to do something differently or better, and then being responsive to what those complaints say.” (HCP 4)

Figure 1. Thematic analysis representing the influences on HCPs’ responses to complaints from HCP and patient/carer perspectives

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