

Interviewing for adverse patient safety event reviews

- Interviews are a critical source of evidence to understand what contributed to adverse patient safety events
- Human memory is affected by context and experience and thereby prone to bias
- Following good interviewing principles minimises the influence of interviewer bias
- Preparing for interviews by developing an interview guide is important to conduct the interview successfully

OVERVIEW

Interviews provide a critical source of evidence that contribute to understanding adverse patient safety events. Interviews are conducted with a range of people, including frontline staff and consumers who were directly involved in the adverse event. Staff who were not directly involved but were instrumental in developing and implementing systems and processes related to the adverse event, such as management and senior leadership, are often also interviewed. Successful interviews:

- maximise the accuracy and amount of detail recalled by interviewees about a certain event¹
- identify systems issues contributing to the adverse event (e.g. existing policies, procedures, safety culture²)
- minimise the influence of interviewer cognitive bias on interviewee responses³.

Human memory and interviews

Obtaining accurate information about an adverse patient safety event during an interview is complex. It is a two-way process that depends on the interviewee being able to recall event-related memories, but also requires an experienced interviewer to support interviewees in accessing their memories and maximise the accuracy and detail of recall. For this process, it is important that interviewers have a basic understanding of human memory.

How memory works

There are three stages associated with human memory:

- encoding (making sense) of information we encounter
- storing this information in memory
- retrieving information when required in the future.

Our brain is actively working during these stages and is strongly influenced by context and experience. This can contribute to our memory being vulnerable to biased thinking.

Memory works by association

Human memory does not store and retrieve information passively like a scanner or a recording device. Humans actively make meaning of, store and retrieve information. This also means that human memory can be altered by the way questions are asked during interviews.

Interviewer bias impacts interview quality

The interviewer's own cognitive bias can subconsciously affect interviewee responses, especially if the interviewer has pre-existing knowledge about the adverse event and surrounding systems, or a relatable experience. This can contribute to the interviewer framing questions in a way that is suggestive and leads interviewees to provide responses that confirm pre-existing knowledge and experiences³.

¹ Fisher, RP, Geiselman, RE, Amador, M. (1989). Field test of the Cognitive Interview: enhancing the recollection of actual victims and witnesses of crime. *J Appl Psychol*, 74(5), 722-7.

² Read the Just culture fact sheet for more information

³ Read the Cognitive Bias fact sheet for more information

It is the interviewer’s role to identify and mitigate their own cognitive biases and the vulnerability of the interviewee’s memory as much as possible. This can be achieved by following good interviewing principles.

Good interviewing principles

Key principles for good interviewing include:

- developing a rapport with the interviewee
- encouraging long and detailed responses
- encouraging a free unstructured recall of the event
- primarily using open questions, minimising closed questions and avoiding leading questions.

See Table 1 for a description and examples for each question type.

Table 1. Interview question types and examples

Question	Description	Examples	Frequency of use
Free recall	Allow interviewee to go back to the day in their memory and talk through it in their own way and pace	‘Tell me everything you can remember about...’ ‘Tell me the sequence of events as you perceived them’	Use frequently
Open questions	Allow for an unlimited response in the interviewee’s own words; encourage lengthy responses	‘Please describe what happened next?’ ‘What can you tell me about the conditions?’ ‘How would you describe your workload at the time?’	Use frequently
Closed questions	Limit amount or scope of information that interviewee can provide; obtain more targeted and specific information	‘Exactly where were you standing?’ ‘How many people were in the room at the time?’	Use infrequently; only if specific detail is necessary
Leading questions	Suggest an answer; can distort interviewees memory	‘Was the patient still bleeding when he arrived?’ ‘How bad was the rostering that day?’	Avoid entirely

Interviewing for adverse event reviews

Interviews conducted for adverse event reviews are typically semi-structured⁴. A semi-structured interview has a pre-determined objective, predominantly open questions, a flexible sequence that is guided by the interviewee responses and encourages long and unstructured responses.

Developing an interview guide

Before the interviews commence, an interview guide should be developed to support interviewers in conducting the interview at a high level. The guide should include open questions relevant to the adverse event, as well as probes to help elicit more information from interviewees (e.g. ‘Please tell me more...’). The guide may also list a number of closed questions to obtain more specific information that may be needed as part of the review.

The questions in the interview guide should be thought of as a way to start the conversation and be used as part of a free-flowing conversation. The questions may not be able to be followed in a specific order. Furthermore, some questions may have already been answered during the conversation and do not need to be specifically asked. It is important not to interrupt the interviewees and instead take notes as a reminder to ask any clarifying questions later.

Establishing rapport and trust with interviewees

Being interviewed about an adverse event can be stressful and re-traumatising. Establishing rapport and an atmosphere of trust where the interviewee feels comfortable to share their perspective is key for a successful interview. This can be achieved by fostering a non-judgemental atmosphere focusing on systems rather than individual issues⁵ and active listening. Active listening is the ability to focus entirely on the interviewee’s responses without distraction. This can be achieved by using encouraging verbal and non-verbal cues, retaining and paraphrasing the information provided by interviewees for the purpose of making the interviewee feel understood and eliciting more information⁶.

⁴ Baumbuch, J. (2010). Semi-structured interviewing in practice-close research. Journal for Specialists in Paediatric Nursing.

⁵ See Human Factors fact sheet for more information

⁶ Louw, S., Todd, R.W., Jimakorn, P. (2011). Active Listening in Qualitative Research Interviews. In Proceedings of the International Conference: Doing Research in Applied Linguistics,

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