

Clinical risk: from problem to opportunity

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Every human action involves an element of risk: "Risk is the possibility that a negative event will occur and it can be measured as the relationship between the probability that a specific event will occur and the extent to which this event's consequences will be negative"¹.

Nowadays, risk is considered to be a social issue because it is thought to be "socially unacceptable" and therefore it is placed among the major bioethical issues of our time.

Medically speaking, doctor errors is almost never tolerated or accepted because it regards an individual's health, or, in extreme cases, life or death.

Any type of structure which offers healthcare, whether it be a hospital, clinic or home nursing scheme implies a high degree of risk. This is because the medical profession involves situations with a high degree of changeableness (also biological) and uncertainty which persist despite all recent technological and scientific advances and make the healthcare system more complex and vulnerable. For this reason, when we look for human error we often discover that this error was not committed by an individual but by an organization. In 2002, Cineas reported that organizational problems influences 70% of hospital error.

We can identify different risk categories in healthcare: occupational (physical, biological and chemical), financial (these are "non clinical" risks which regard security and eventual economic risks) and, finally, a clinical risk which regard the possibility that a patient might be harmed by some types of treatment. This last type implies both a structural and organizational risk and includes elements which involve physician error.

The three types of risk are closely correlated and the same risk can belong to more than one category.

Particular attention should be paid to clinical risk since the well being and safety of patients should represent the utmost priority for any health care organization.

The Ania (National Insurer's Association) estimates that in 2004, three hundred and twenty thousand patients were victims of accidents. Furthermore, insurance claims for malpractice went up by 148% between 1994 and 2002 (source: Sole 24 ore).

Clinical risk is clearly is most specific to medical treatments performed on patients and inherently involves the behaviour of medical personnel and the way in which the-

ir organization functions.

It is vital to be aware of and analyse these facets of the healthcare system so in order to improve security and quality control systems. Clinical risk, therefore, involves a systematic and multidisciplinary approach involving specific analytical instruments.

Healthcare and patient safety should be viewed from a global view point which considers different facets of quality, not just from one which only considers risk. A proactive stance must be taken before errors are committed: all healthcare providers must implement a patient oriented strategic plan in order to reduce risk and error.

Therefore, identifying and managing risk are important activities when one wishes to make safety a priority; this holds true in: managerial, administrative and clinical areas.

Specific instruments must be adopted in order to identify, evaluate and reduce any element which poses a risk to patient safety. However it is important to accept that risk can never be completely eliminated in the healthcare field, even though better patient care and quality control serve to significantly reduce its occurrence.

The validity of a clinical risk management system depends above all on the creation of a positive "culture" surrounding the idea of risk, based on knowledge that error is human and "to cover up your mistakes is the most serious of intellectual crimes"².

In Italy, unlike other countries, risk management is still not taken seriously throughout the healthcare industry. Few medical facilities are equipped for the development and maintenance of security and risk management systems. "Overall, the Italian healthcare system is still trying to quantify the extent to which safety and risk are problems. Consequently, limited action has been taken up till now, at least in terms of global organizational strategies"³.

References

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