

Adopting a just culture guide

Helping to reduce variability in how managers respond to staff involved in a patient safety incident

Sussex Community NHS Foundation Trust

Sussex Community NHS Foundation Trust (SCFT) is the main provider of NHS community health and care services in Sussex. The trust provides a wide range of medical, nursing and therapeutic care to over 9,000 people a day and has approximately 4,750 employees.

The Care Quality Commission has rated the trust 'good' overall, an achievement that relies on a high degree of continuity in senior leadership and a focus on staff wellbeing. To help drive improvement, the board-level programme from Good to Great has set out several areas to work on.

Treating staff fairly is an ongoing priority for the trust

Treating staff fairly is a trust priority and results from the 2017 NHS Staff Survey suggest that this approach is working. SCFT was the community trust with the highest percentage of staff responding positively to the statement 'My organisation treats staff who are involved in an error, near miss or incident fairly'.

SCFT has a dedicated, full-time patient safety incident investigation team specialising in managing investigations and considers this contributes to ensuring that staff feel well supported. These investigators see their role as supporting staff and patients following an incident and make it clear that they come into each investigation with no preconceptions. There have been occasions when managers of staff involved in incidents have tried to use this team to resolve performance issues, but the investigation team ensures the investigation process is not used inappropriately. The team identifies where systems can be improved and learning can take place to reduce risk of recurrence. HR is involved for performance issues and these are managed through a separate process.

While investigators have a clinical background, they do not directly provide care. The trust believes there are significant advantages to this separation of roles. For example:

- Specialisation means the team's skill in managing investigation develops faster.

- Delays in starting a serious incident investigation are minimised because clinicians do not need to balance investigations with their ongoing care delivery commitments.
- Separation provides a degree of objectivity as investigators will not be working in another capacity with the people involved in an incident and therefore cannot bring their own prejudices.

The team also has dedicated staff members working full time on implementing findings from investigations, including quality initiatives, updating policy and procedures.

Using a just culture guide to further embed a fair patient safety culture

The organisation already has a good reputation for treating staff fairly but believes that adopting NHS Improvement's '[A just culture guide](#)' will benefit the existing processes. It is an opportunity to reduce variability in how managers respond to staff involved in patient safety incidents and to ensure they are treated fairly.

Shortly after its publication, several people working at the trust started referencing 'A just culture guide' as an update to the Incident Decision Tree. One member of the investigation team even saw it as a useful communication tool to inform patients about investigations. It helped them explain why individual members of staff were unlikely to be 'punished' because of the investigation.

To ensure that the guide has wider uptake, the clinical governance team took it to the Serious Incident Review Group, the trust-wide Governance Group, and then the trust Executive Committee.

It is now becoming embedded in practice and part of our established investigation process.

Colin Edwards, Head of Quality Governance summarises the impact as follows:

"A just culture guide' came at the right time for us, giving us an opportunity to further document and communicate our approach to how we want our managers to determine whether staff involved in a patient safety incident require targeted support or intervention to work safely. By seeking Executive approval through a traditional governance pathway, we also ensure that we have sufficient engagement and buy-in from staff and patient representatives. To date we have not received any resistance at all to the just culture guide".

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