



Incident investigations in health care: Focusing on change instead of blame

When an incident occurs in the workplace, a common reaction is to look for somewhere to place blame. It's more important and productive to look for reasons why the incident happened and what can be done to prevent it from recurring. In other words, focus on changes that will make the workplace safer rather than blaming those involved in the incident.

What is an incident investigation?

An *incident investigation* is a process that is used to determine the causes of an incident so you can take steps to prevent a similar event. Incident investigations are required by the *Workers Compensation Act* and must be done in a timely manner by people who understand the work. The investigation should include an employer and worker representative.

Traditionally, recommendations from incident investigations have focused on changing workers' behaviour. Typical suggestions include additional training or asking workers to be more attentive to workplace risks. This approach often fails to identify the underlying causes of the incident and may not improve safety in the workplace.

Incident investigations that make a difference

It's easy to find fault with individuals, but workers' decisions make sense to them at the time of an incident; no one consciously decides to become injured. Asking workers to "be safer" will not likely lead them to work more safely. A more effective approach to investigating incidents is to assume that errors are a natural part of work and everyone is susceptible to them. It is important to recognize that workers' perceptions and actions are shaped by their interaction with the work environment.

According to the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation, an incident is "an accident or other occurrence which resulted in or had the potential for causing an injury or occupational disease." In health care, incidents are often related to:

- Patient handling
- Violent or aggressive behaviour
- Exposure to infectious disease
- Slips, trips, and falls

Health care workplaces have measures in place to protect workers from injury. These measures include equipment, assessments and care plans, policies and procedures, training, and supervision. Measures that eliminate the risk are the most effective and those that simply protect a particular worker are less effective. Health care settings and patients are constantly changing, and gaps can develop between how work should be done and how it is actually being done. An investigation is an opportunity to learn from an incident to uncover gaps, ask why these gaps exist, and to correct them.

What to consider during incident investigations

Work can be divided into three components: the job, the organization, and the individual. Since worker performance is affected by all three of these components, an effective incident investigation should consider the effectiveness and interaction of all three. The following are examples of work components that should be considered.

Job

- Level of physical effort
- Workload
- Appropriateness of services for patient population
- Adequacy of safe work procedures
- Equipment or workspace design
- Relevancy of patient assessment

Organizational

- Level of certainty in roles and responsibilities
- Planning
- Effectiveness of changes from previous incidents
- Communication
- Adequacy of resources (for example, equipment, staff, or supervision)

Individual

- Adequacy of training, including new worker and refresher training
- Experience or knowledge to do the task safely
- Awareness of hazards associated with the work

An effective incident investigation not only determines whether certain conditions exist but also questions if there is a better way to do things.

See the case examples for possible questions to ask when doing an incident investigation.



Make effective changes

Once you've identified what contributed to the incident, take corrective action. Consider targeting these actions at various levels of the organization, such as the care team, department management, and senior management. If permanent corrective actions will take time to implement, use temporary measures to protect workers until you can make permanent changes.

For more information on the requirements for conducting incident investigations, see sections 172–177 of the *Workers Compensation Act* and Section 3.4 of the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation at WorkSafeBC.com.



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