

# A just culture guide

## Supporting consistent, constructive and fair evaluation of the actions of staff involved in patient safety incidents

This guide supports a conversation between managers about whether a staff member involved in a patient safety incident requires specific individual support or intervention to work safely. Action singling out an individual is rarely appropriate - most patient safety issues have deeper causes and require wider action.

The actions of staff involved in an incident should **not** automatically be examined using this *just culture guide*, but it can be useful if the investigation of an incident begins to suggest a concern about an individual action. The guide highlights important principles that need to be considered before formal management action is directed at an individual staff member.

An important part of a just culture is being able to explain the approach that will be taken if an incident occurs. A just culture guide can be used by all parties to explain how they will respond to incidents, as a reference point for organisational HR and incident reporting policies, and as a communication tool to help staff, patients and families understand how the appropriate response to a member of staff involved in an incident can and should differ according to the circumstances in which an error was made. As well as protecting staff from unfair targeting, using the guide helps protect patients by removing the tendency to treat wider patient safety issues as individual issues.

**Please note:**

- A **just culture guide** is not a replacement for an investigation of a patient safety incident. Only a full investigation can identify the underlying causes that need to be acted on to reduce the risk of future incidents.
- A **just culture guide** can be used at any point of an investigation, but the guide may need to be revisited as more information becomes available.
- A **just culture guide** does not replace HR advice and should be used in conjunction with organisational policy.
- The **guide** can only be used to take one action (or failure to act) through the guide at a time. If multiple actions are involved in an incident they must be considered separately.

Start here - **Q1. deliberate harm test**

1a. Was there any intention to cause harm?



Yes

**Recommendation:** Follow organisational guidance for appropriate management action. This could involve: contact relevant regulatory bodies, suspension of staff, and referral to police and disciplinary processes. Wider investigation is still needed to understand how and why patients were not protected from the actions of the individual.

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No go to next question - **Q2. health test**

2a. Are there indications of substance abuse?



Yes

**Recommendation:** Follow organisational substance abuse at work guidance. Wider investigation is still needed to understand if substance abuse could have been recognised and addressed earlier.

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2b. Are there indications of physical ill health?



Yes

**Recommendation:** Follow organisational guidance for health issues affecting work, which is likely to include occupational health referral. Wider investigation is still needed to understand if health issues could have been recognised and addressed earlier.

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2c. Are there indications of mental ill health?

if **No to all** go to next question - **Q3. foresight test**

3a. Are there agreed protocols/accepted practice in place that apply to the action/omission in question?



If No to any

**Recommendation:** Action singling out the individual is unlikely to be appropriate; the patient safety incident investigation should indicate the wider actions needed to improve safety for future patients. These actions may include, but not be limited to, the individual.

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3b. Were the protocols/accepted practice workable and in routine use?

3c. Did the individual knowingly depart from these protocols?

if **Yes to all** go to next question - **Q4. substitution test**

4a. Are there indications that other individuals from the same peer group, with comparable experience and qualifications, would behave in the same way in similar circumstances?



If Yes to any

**Recommendation:** Action singling out the individual is unlikely to be appropriate; the patient safety incident investigation should indicate the wider actions needed to improve safety for future patients. These actions may include, but not be limited to, the individual.

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4b. Was the individual missed out when relevant training was provided to their peer group?

4c. Did more senior members of the team fail to provide supervision that normally should be provided?

if **No to all** go to next question - **Q5. mitigating circumstances**

5a. Were there any significant mitigating circumstances?



Yes

**Recommendation:** Action directed at the individual may not be appropriate; follow organisational guidance, which is likely to include senior HR advice on what degree of mitigation applies. The patient safety incident investigation should indicate the wider actions needed to improve safety for future patients.

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if **No**

**Recommendation:** Follow organisational guidance for appropriate management action. This could involve individual training, performance management, competency assessments, changes to role or increased supervision, and may require relevant regulatory bodies to be contacted, staff suspension and disciplinary processes. The patient safety incident investigation should indicate the wider actions needed to improve safety for future patients.

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Based on the work of Professor James Reason and the National Patient Safety Agency's Incident Decision Tree

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