Learning from positive deviants to improve patient safety
Ongoing project: October 2013 – September 2016

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Rationale
The delivery of safe patient care is challenging for healthcare organisations. Traditional improvement methods for patient safety are deficit based, focusing on errors which have already occurred. This PhD thesis will explore how we can learn from, and improve patient safety using a more asset based approach called ‘positive deviance’. The approach assumes that solutions to problems, such as patient safety, already exist and that some individuals or teams succeed despite facing the same constraints as others. Positive deviants are therefore teams or individuals that demonstrate consistently excellent performance in a particular area of care.

Within healthcare settings various methods have been used to conduct positive deviance research and little guidance exists about how the approach should be applied. Throughout this PhD we will explore how positive deviance can be used to improve patient safety within two distinct healthcare settings – primary and secondary care. In addition we aim to advance the methods used for positive deviance research within healthcare.

Research Questions to be addressed
• Can we identify positively deviant clinical teams, which deliver exceptionally safe patient care, using routinely collected data?
• What strategies and behaviours do positively deviant clinical teams use to deliver exceptionally safe patient care?
• How do team dynamics and culture differ between positively deviant and averagely performing clinical teams?
• Do positive deviants successfully deliver safe patient care by being deviant or by doing things differently to others?

Methods of investigation
Throughout this PhD three studies will be undertaken. Firstly a systematic review will explore the methods have previously been used for positive deviance research conducted within healthcare organisations. The results of this will inform the design and methods of the following studies.

The second study will be conducted on acute elderly medical wards. Routinely collected safety data will be analysed to identify positively deviant ward teams within Yorkshire and Humber. This data will be triangulated with patient and staff perspectives about safety to validate whether we have identified wards that are truly exceptional. Qualitative methods (focus groups and field work diaries) will be used to explore how ward teams successfully deliver this safe patient care and comparisons will be made with wards that have good-average safety performance. We aim to identify concrete strategies and behaviours used as well as explore how concepts such as team dynamics and culture influence success.
The third study will be conducted in primary care and follow a similar approach to the study above. Routinely collected data will be used to identify positively deviant GP surgeries and qualitative methods will be used to explore, both on concrete and abstract level, what these teams do to successfully deliver safe patient care. Within this study we also hope to unpack the concept of positive ‘deviance’ more fully to understand how this type of deviance may be operationalised within the context of healthcare.

**Outputs**


Throughout the PhD outputs hope to include journal articles and conference presentations. In addition the findings from these studies will contribute to the research being conducted within the CLAHRC theme – Evidence-Based Transformation with the NHS (click here for more information).

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