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CORRESPONDENCE

Internal reporting system: we must look behind the curtain

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Dear Editor,

We read with great interest the article "Understanding medical error and adverse events in ICU patients" [1]. The authors described that an internal reporting system of all adverse events is the backbone for preventing medical errors. We agree with that, but only a report is not enough to reduce the incidence of adverse events. Logically the authors promote a change of culture in the ICU—not looking for "who", much more looking for "why" with a focus on the system and not the individual. This "why" is much more complex as it seems on the first sight.

Two types of issues should be distinguished: is there a technical problem or an adaptive challenge? Technical problems can be clearly defined, and a specific process for solving the problem introduced. Adaptive challenges are different; they are difficult to identify (and easy to deny). The process of identifying requires learning, the solution is not self-evident, and the solution requires an additional process of learning—indeed, the stakeholders themselves must create the solution. This requires changes in behavior and may also necessitate crossing existing borders.

The great mistake in solving adaptive challenges is to treat them like technical problems. For example, the proposal to implement electronic prescription and delivery systems to reduce errors, as described in the article, is a technical approach. The adaptive challenge in errors of drug administration is to encourage nurses to question and challenge the physicians, if they prescribe wrongly. Additionally, it is necessary to change the physicians' behavior such that they accept that their orders may be challenged.

Adaptive problems are often system problems, and a change in behavior of all stakeholders is needed to solve them. The ability to promote adaptive learning is the challenge for leadership: how to guide team members through problem solving with motivation and confidence, rather than autocratically dictating a solution. Therefore it needs the right strategies and tools in leadership [2]. We believe that these leadership skills and tools to change systems are insufficiently addressed in the education of physicians. In conclusion, additionally to an effective internal reporting system, there is a need for teams to solve problems and challenges in the right way.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflicts of interest
The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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