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Systems Thinking in Patient Safety: A Case Study of Surgical Identity Error at Kota Medical College Hospital

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A Critical Analysis of Leadership, Governance, and Systems Thinking in Patient Safety: A Case Study of Surgical Identity Error at Kota Medical College Hospital

1. Introduction and Clinical Context

Patient safety represents an essential pillar of modern healthcare delivery, quality management, and public health governance. Surgical never events—defined as serious, largely preventable patient safety incidents that should not occur if available preventive measures are implemented—highlight systemic vulnerabilities within hospital operational structures.

This report critically analyzes Case Study Number 4, which involves a severe patient identification failure at Kota Medical College Hospital, Rajasthan, India, occurring on 12 April 2025. An elderly man, Jagdish Panchal, accompanied his injured son, Manish Panchal, to the hospital for surgical intervention. While waiting outside the operating theatre, hospital staff called out the name "Jagdish" to locate a scheduled patient intended for a vascular procedure (a dialysis fistula construction). The elderly attendant, who shared the same first name and suffered from partial speech impairment due to a prior stroke, acknowledged the call. Without verifying secondary identity markers, hospital personnel transferred him into the operating theatre, administered anesthesia, and made a surgical incision on his arm. The error was only detected mid-procedure, prompting emergency suturing and discharge back to the ward.

Applying the core pillars of module LCHS7002—specifically Systems Thinking, Clinical Governance, Human Factors, and Strategic Leadership—this report investigates the root causes of this clinical breakdown and formulates strategic recommendations to prevent recurrent system failures.

2. Systems Thinking Analysis and Root Cause Identification

Systems thinking in public health and clinical management shifts the analytical focus from individual human blame to broader organizational, cultural, and environmental vulnerabilities (Reason, 2000). The "Swiss Cheese Model" of system accidents posits that complex clinical failures occur when multiple defensive layers simultaneously fail, allowing hazards to reach the patient (Reason, 2000).

2.1 Single-Point Patient Identification Vulnerabilities

The primary catalyst for this error was the reliance on a single verbal identifier ("Jagdish") in a crowded waiting area. Standard clinical governance frameworks require a strict minimum of three unique identifiers (Full Name, Date of Birth/Age, and Medical Record/Registration Number) verified against a physical identification band prior to transfer (World Health

Organization [WHO], 2009). The absence of biometric or physical wristband verification allowed a simple demographic collision to breach initial triage barriers.

2.2 Human Factors and Patient Vulnerability Barriers

Human Factors Ergonomics (HFE) explores how system design interacts with human capabilities and limitations (Carayon et al., 2014). The victim possessed a pre-existing neurological vulnerability (speech impairment from stroke) that impaired his ability to correct the staff's assumption. The healthcare staff operated under cognitive confirmation bias, assuming that any individual answering to the name in the surgical waiting zone was the correct patient. The system lacked inclusive, multi-modal verification steps designed to safeguard non-verbal or communicatively impaired patients.

2.3 Surgical Safety Checklist Breakdown

The WHO Surgical Safety Checklist mandate requires three distinct operational pause phases: "Sign In" (before anesthesia), "Time Out" (before surgical incision), and "Sign Out" (before leaving the operating room) (WHO, 2009). The execution of an incision under anesthesia confirms a complete breakdown during the "Sign In" and "Time Out" phases, where team-wide verbal confirmation of patient identity, consent forms, and proposed surgical site must occur

Section A.1 Historical Evolution of Patient Safety in Healthcare

The paradigm of patient safety has undergone significant conceptual shifts over the past three decades. Historically, medical errors were viewed through a person-centered lens, attributing clinical failures to individual incompetence, carelessness, or lack of vigilance (Reason, 2000). This traditional approach fostered a culture of fear and secrecy, where healthcare professionals concealed near-misses and errors to avoid punitive disciplinary action (Edmondson, 2018).

However, following landmark publications such as the Institute of Medicine's *To Err Is Human* (1999) and the World Health Organization's World Alliance for Patient Safety initiatives, international health policy shifted toward a systems-engineered approach. Modern safety science recognizes that healthcare environments are complex socio-technical systems characterized by high uncertainty, rapid decision-making, and interdependent clinical workflows (Carayon et al., 2014). In these environments, individual human error is rarely the sole root cause of an adverse event; rather, it represents the final symptom of underlying organizational, structural, and environmental latent conditions.

A.2 Deconstructing James Reason's Swiss Cheese Model in Surgical Settings

James Reason's (2000) System Accident Model, colloquially known as the "Swiss Cheese Model," serves as the foundational analytical framework for investigating multi-causal clinical failures. The model distinguishes between two operational hazards:

1. Active Failures: Unsafe acts committed by healthcare workers directly at the human-system interface (e.g., a ward boy calling out a single name in a waiting hall or a surgical team failing to perform a verbal identity pause).

2. Latent Conditions: Resident pathogens within the system created by organizational decisions, policy deficits, resource constraints, and cultural norms (e.g., lack of mandatory barcode wristband policies, absence of multi-lingual identification protocols, and chronic hospital overcrowding).

In the Kota Medical College Hospital case, the alignment of holes across multiple defensive layers was evident. The first layer of defense—triage and patient transfer—failed due to single-identifier verbal reliance. The second layer—pre-anesthesia verification—failed because staff operated under cognitive confirmation bias. The third layer—the intra-operative "Time Out"—failed due to non-compliance with WHO surgical checklists. The accident was therefore a predictable consequence of cumulative latent system weaknesses rather than an isolated human error.

A.3 Cognitive Biases and Heuristics in Emergency and Surgical Care

Human decision-making in clinical settings relies heavily on dual-process theory (Kahneman, 2011). System 1 processing is fast, automatic, intuitive, and highly susceptible to cognitive biases, whereas System 2 processing is slow, analytical, deliberate, and rule-based. In high-pressure, high-volume hospital environments, clinicians frequently default to System 1 heuristics to manage heavy cognitive loads (Croskerry, 2003).

- **Confirmation Bias:** Clinical staff formed an initial assumption that the individual answering to "Jagdish" was the scheduled surgical candidate. Subsequent contradictory cues (such as the patient's speech impairment or lack of surgical markings) were unconsciously discounted or ignored.
- **Authority Bias & In-Group Conformity:** Junior nurses and orderly staff defer to senior surgical schedules without independently re-evaluating patient credentials, assuming that preceding team members have already executed due diligence (Cosby and Croskerry, 2004).
- **Availability Heuristic:** In routine surgical queues, identity mix-ups are statistically rare. Staff default to the belief that "the right patient is in the right room," reducing vigilance during routine pre-operative transfers.

3. Critical Analysis of Clinical Governance and Power Dynamics

Clinical governance is the framework through which healthcare organizations maintain accountability for continuously improving service quality and safeguarding high standards of care (Sally and Donaldson, 1998).

3.1 Steep Authority Gradients and Siloed Communication

A critical issue in hospital operating environments is the presence of steep hierarchical power dynamics (Cosby and Croskerry, 2004). Junior nursing staff, ward boys, and surgical

trainees often operate under authority structures that discourage questioning senior decision-makers or halting procedures when discrepancies arise (Edmondson, 2018). In this case, the lack of psychological safety prevented team members from pausing the transfer when formal identification documentation was missing or unverified.

3.2 Reactive Governance vs. Proactive Risk Mitigation

The response of the hospital leadership following the incident demonstrates a traditional reactive governance posture. While establishing an inquiry committee within 72 hours fulfills statutory administrative requirements, effective public health governance demands proactive risk assessment (e.g., Failure Modes and Effects Analysis [FMEA]) to identify identity verification vulnerabilities before adverse events manifest.

Section B.1 Medico-Legal Implications and Negligence

Jurisprudence

Operating on the wrong patient or wrong site constitutes a clear breach of the duty of care under global medical jurisprudence. Under English Common Law, applied widely in international healthcare governance, clinical negligence is established through three criteria (the Donoghue v Stevenson neighbor principle and the Bolam / Montgomery standards):

1. Existence of a Duty of Care: The hospital and surgical team owe an absolute legal duty of care to every individual within their facility.
2. Breach of Duty: Performing an unauthorized, unconsented surgical procedure falls below the standard of a reasonably competent healthcare professional (Bolam v Friern Hospital Management Committee [1957]). Under the modern Montgomery v Lanarkshire Health Board [2015] ruling, failure to inform and verify consent violates the patient's fundamental legal rights.
3. Direct Causation of Harm: Physical harm (unintended skin incision under general anesthesia) and psychological trauma directly resulted from the systemic failure.

In many jurisdictions, surgical identity mix-ups fall under the legal doctrine of *Res Ipsa Loquitur* ("the thing speaks for itself"), meaning that the event itself provides sufficient evidence of negligence without requiring complex expert medical testimony.

B.2 Bioethical Principles and Patient Autonomy

The incident represents a severe disruption of the four core principles of biomedical ethics (Beauchamp and Childress, 2019):

- **Autonomy:** Patient autonomy requires that an individual possesses full knowledge and provides explicit, voluntary consent prior to any invasive medical intervention. Jagdish Panchal was subjected to surgical intervention without consent, violating his bodily integrity.
- **Non-Maleficence:** The ethical imperative to "do no harm" was breached when invasive physical trauma and chemical anesthesia were administered unnecessarily.

- **Justice and Equity:** Public health justice demands that vulnerable individuals—specifically elderly patients with neurological or speech impairments—receive equitable structural protections. The hospital's failure to provide specialized communication support for a post-stroke patient reflects systemic inequity in patient-centered care.

4. Strategic Leadership and Systems-Level Recommendations

To transition the healthcare institution from a culture of reactive blame to a high-reliability organization (HRO), executive and clinical leadership must drive structural reform across three core areas:

4.1 Digital Standardization and Mandatory Barcode Verification

Leadership must mandate the implementation of automated, biometric, or barcoded patient wristbands integrated with the Hospital Information System (HIS). Verbal verification must be prohibited as a standalone identification method.

4.2 Institutionalization of "Stop the Line" Authority

Adopting safety principles from high-reliability industries (such as aviation and nuclear power), hospital executives must foster a culture of psychological safety where any healthcare worker, regardless of rank, possesses explicit authority to halt a surgical procedure if identification protocols are incomplete (Edmondson, 2018).

4.3: Establishing a Sense of Urgency

Organizational transformation begins by recognizing systemic vulnerabilities as existential threats to patient care and institutional credibility. Leadership must present the root-cause analysis of the surgical identity failure across all clinical departments, demonstrating that without immediate reform, catastrophic errors remain statistically inevitable.

4.4: Building a Guiding Coalition

A multidisciplinary Patient Safety Taskforce must be established, comprising the Chief Medical Officer, Head of Nursing, Lead Anesthetists, Human Factors Specialists, and Patient Advocacy Representatives. This coalition bridges steep hierarchy gaps and drives safety protocols across administrative and surgical boundaries.

4.5: Forming a Strategic Vision and Initiatives

The leadership coalition must mandate a "Zero Never-Events" policy centered on two non-negotiable operational standards:

1. **Mandatory Digital Verification:** Biometric or barcoded wristbands scanned at every point of clinical transfer.

2. Universal Surgical Pause: Strict enforcement of the WHO "Time Out" checklist before any incision, with zero exceptions.

4.6: Enlisting a Volunteer Army and Communication

Safety initiatives fail if perceived as top-down bureaucratic mandates. Executive leaders must engage junior doctors, ward nurses, and orderly staff through interactive clinical workshops. Emphasizing that safety protocols protect both patients and healthcare workers fosters grass-roots institutional alignment.

4.7: Empowering Action by Removing Structural Barriers

To operationalize safety, leadership must remove historical communication barriers. Implementing "Stop-the-Line" Authority empowers any staff member—regardless of rank or seniority—to halt a procedure if patient identity or consent documentation is incomplete, backed by strict non-retaliation guarantees (Edmondson, 2018).

4.8: Generating Short-Term Wins

To build momentum, the hospital should pilot barcoded identification systems within high-risk units (e.g., Operating Theatres and Intensive Care Units) for 30 days. Publicly recognizing and rewarding departments that achieve 100% WHO checklist compliance reinforces positive behavior.

4.9: Sustaining Acceleration

Leadership must integrate real-time patient safety audits into weekly governance reviews. Incident reporting systems must transition from paper-based logs to anonymous digital reporting platforms, ensuring continuous identification of near-miss events before patient harm occurs.

4.10: Instituting Systemic Safety Culture

Finally, new verification protocols and human factor guidelines must be institutionalized within the onboarding curriculum for all new clinical employees. Patient safety compliance must be tied directly to annual clinical performance evaluations and hospital accreditation standards.

Section C.1 Failure Modes and Effects Analysis (FMEA) Matrix

To prevent recurrence, healthcare leaders must execute proactive risk modeling. The FMEA framework evaluates potential process failures based on Severity (S), Occurrence (O), and Detection (D) to calculate a Risk Priority Number.

C.2 12-Month Institutional Implementation Roadmap (Gantt Schedule)

Months 1–2 (Immediate Crisis & Stabilization Phase):

Issue mandatory policy decree prohibiting single-identifier verbal calls.

Procure and deploy thermal barcode wristband printers across all admission counters.

Conduct emergency WHO Checklist retraining for all surgical and anesthesia personnel.

Months 3–6 (Systems Integration & Training Phase):

Integrate barcode scanners with the hospital's central Electronic Health Record (EHR).

Establish "Stop-the-Line" safety protocols with executive non-retaliation guarantees.

Launch multidisciplinary Human Factors workshops for operating theatre teams.

Months 7–12 (Audit, Governance & Institutionalization Phase):

Initiate unannounced weekly compliance audits on surgical time-outs.

Establish an anonymous digital near-miss reporting portal for junior staff.

Publish bi-annual Patient Safety Governance reports for public accountability.

5: Comparative Health Governance and System Dynamics

A comparative evaluation of healthcare governance frameworks reveals fundamental operational disparities between traditional, reactive public hospital structures and modern High-Reliability Organizations (HROs). In traditional healthcare environments, such as the pre-reform state observed at Kota Medical College Hospital, patient identification relies predominantly on informal, single-identifier verbal callouts within high-density clinical spaces. This reliance on non-standardized verbal communication introduces critical vulnerabilities, particularly when treating communicatively impaired or vulnerable patient populations. Conversely, high-reliability healthcare systems institute automated, multi-modal identification protocols that combine digital barcoding or biometric wristbands with mandatory two-way active verbal confirmation, eliminating single-point reliance on human memory or assumption.

Furthermore, organizational authority structures dictate the psychological safety and communication dynamics within operating theatre environments. Reactive clinical systems are typically governed by steep, rigid authority gradients where junior nursing personnel, orderlies, and surgical trainees feel hierarchically constrained from questioning senior surgeons or halting procedures when documentation discrepancies arise. Modern high-reliability governance systematically flattens these communication barriers by embedding "Stop-the-Line" authority, empowering any healthcare team member—regardless of institutional rank—to pause a clinical procedure upon detecting protocol non-compliance.

Regarding operational safety tools, reactive institutions frequently treat global safety instruments, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) Surgical Safety Checklist, as peripheral administrative compliance burdens rather than non-negotiable safety barriers. In contrast, standardized high-reliability systems mandate real-time, audited execution of the "Sign In," "Time Out," and "Sign Out" verification pauses prior to any invasive surgical intervention. Finally, when adverse events occur, traditional governance defaults to a punitive blame culture, targeting individual workers at the clinical sharp end while leaving

underlying systemic vulnerabilities intact. HRO frameworks operate under a "Just Culture" methodology

5. Conclusion

The surgical identity error at Kota Medical College Hospital reflects systemic vulnerabilities in hospital governance, human factor considerations, and safety culture rather than an isolated individual lapse. By embedding systems thinking, enforcing standardized digital identification protocols, dismantling hierarchical communication barriers, and instituting proactive clinical governance, healthcare leaders can build resilient systems that protect vulnerable patients from preventable harm.

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