Safety is More than Caring: Mapping the Gaps between Expert, Public and Health Care Professionals Understanding of Patient Safety

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Patient safety—the prevention of harm to patients —is a pressing problem in America and a crucial part of what it means to offer and receive quality health care. Yet the public and, to a striking degree, health care professionals, don't fully recognize the scope and implications of the issue.

The Betsy Lehman Center and FrameWorks Institute, a nonprofit that uses research to shape public discourse on social and scientific issues, are exploring the understandings and implicit assumptions that health care professionals and the public have about patient safety and how these views impede efforts to create awareness and galvanize support for effective solutions.

Our findings reveal that both groups hold deep beliefs about health, health care professionals, systems, and human nature that often contradict what experts in the field know about patient safety. For example:

- **Prevalence of adverse events: High vs. extremely rare.** Despite advances, experts know that adverse events remain prevalent while both the public and health care professionals believe them to be rare.

- **Human error: Manageable vs. inevitable.** Experts see human error as a problem that can be effectively managed with robust safety systems. By contrast, the public sees error as an immutable aspect of human nature and health care professionals believe human error is currently managed as well as possible; adverse events that do occur can't be prevented.

- **Doctors: Part of the solution vs. the key to safety.** Experts understand that health care professionals are central to patient safety but focus on redesigning systems and changing organizational culture as keys to making meaningful progress. Both the public and health care professionals view an individual practitioner's caring and competence as the main determinants of safety.

- **Medical culture: Important priority vs. not on the radar.** Experts emphasize that medical culture needs to change to prioritize safety and transparency. The public is unaware of the role power dynamics play in medical settings, while health care professionals do not see culture change as a solution to safety problems.

- **Prevention of adverse events: Achievable vs. impossible.** Experts see prevention as eminently achievable with the right changes to systems, culture and policy. The public is much more fatalistic due to assumptions about human error and the impersonal nature of systems. Health care professionals think they are already doing everything they can to keep patients safe.

If patient safety leaders and advocates better understand how people think about patient safety, they can anticipate reactions to messages and develop communications that spark a more productive conversation—one that deepens understanding and builds support for solutions.

To narrow these gaps in understandings, the Betsy Lehman Center and FrameWorks are developing and testing new ways to frame the conversation about what it means to deliver and receive safe health care. We're studying how to:

- Expand the concept of health care "quality" to include "safety"

- Make systems a part of the human story of health care

- Explain how human error can be managed

- Shift understandings of the patient role in the safety of care

- Expand people's thinking about solutions.

Our reframing strategy will deepen understanding of patient safety, increase its salience, build support for solutions and ultimately change how society thinks about and acts upon this critically important issue.

The full report is available [on our website](#).

ABOUT THE BETSY LEHMAN CENTER

The Betsy Lehman Center is a Massachusetts state agency that uses communications and research to catalyze the efforts of providers, policymakers, and consumers working toward safer health care across the state.

ABOUT FRAMEWORKS INSTITUTE

An independent nonprofit organization, FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary communications research to empirically identify the most effective ways of reframing social and scientific topics.