

## Chapter 7

# The Psychological Impact of Medical Error on Patients, Family Members, and Health Professionals

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### ABSTRACT

*The current chapter examines the psychological implications emerging from medical errors. Whilst the psychological effects have studied, nonetheless the consequent impacts and the underlying psychological causes have not been sufficiently analysed and/ or interpreted. The chapter will add to the literature by using a psychodynamic approach in analysing the psychological impact of medical errors and provide interpretations of the underlying causes. The chapter concludes that medical errors lead to a series of implications. For the patient the quality of interactions with health professionals are directly affected and usually have immediate consequences. The impact of these consequences in the patient is mediated by the patient's personality, history of the individual and the psychoanalytic destiny of the patient. For the patient's relatives medical errors create emotional cracks leading to regression and eventual transference of the medical errors as a "bad" object. For health professionals medical errors impact upon the psychological defence mechanisms of the psychic Ego.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Medical errors have been identified as the most common type of error affecting the safety of patients (Brady, Malone, & Fleming, 2009). The majority of people that are in contact with the health services, either as services users or service providers, have experiences of a medical error. However, dealing with the aftermath of a medical error and the manner in which this impacts on each individual is not identical or repeatable. The medical error from a psychological perspective to a great degree depends on its 'history, on the story of its protagonists and on the spatial-temporal features whereby the medical error occurred. Furthermore, whilst there is an immediate and possibly long term effect of the medical error to patients, family members and health professionals, nonetheless this effect is very different. Patient and family members experience the medical errors as victims, whereas health professionals experience the medical errors not just as perpetrators but according to several studies (Pratt & Jachna, 2015; Panella, et al., 2014; Seys, et al., 2013) and as second victims.

The social representations of medical errors from patients, family members and health professionals, and the somatic and psychological effects of medical errors have been widely discussed in the literature. However, the analysis of the underlying psychological causality of medical errors and the interpretation of its consequences based on a psychodynamic approach is currently lacking in the wider literature. The current chapter aims at highlighting the psychological causes of the medical error and interpreting via a psychodynamic approach the impact these have on patients, family members and health professionals.

## **BACKGROUND**

While there are some studies investigating the psychological effects of medical errors on family members (Worsham, 2009; Delbanco & Bell, 2007; Gallagher et al., 2003), and some other studies exploring health professionals experiences and roles in medical errors (Waterman, et al., 2007; Vincent, 2003; Duclos, et al., 2005), nonetheless the literature concedes that there are insufficient available evidence to explicitly determine the impact of medical errors on patients (Elder, et al., 2005; Mazor, et al., 2004).

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