Overview of Just Culture

Readings
1. Westphal, J. Basic concepts of a just culture. Federation Forum Magazine. 2009.
2. Dekker, S. Just culture balancing safety and accountability. 2nd edition. New York, NY: CRC Press Taylor & Francis Group; 2012.
3. The differences between human error, at-risk behavior, and reckless behavior are key to a just culture. Institute for Safe Medication Practices. 2020.

Objectives
1. Describe the background behind Just Culture including:
   a. Define Just Culture, human error, at-risk behavior, and reckless behavior

Background

Just culture is a concept that attempts to improve system design and behavioral choices to manage human fallibility.[1] Organizations spanning from aviation to healthcare are adapting to Just Culture principles, rather than placing the blame on an individual. One of the ideas of Just Culture is to determine what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior.[2] In order for an organization to follow Just Culture, it is key to identify and differentiate human error, at-risk, and reckless behavior. Additionally, it is important to note how to manage each in order to improve one's behavioral choices to avoid errors in the future.

Human error is an honest mistake made by a person. Often described as "inevitable, unpredictable, and unintentional" and the person did not decide to make an error. Human error can be the result of an internal or external factor. Internal factors may include stress, fatigue, or other forms of psychosocial factors. In contrast, external factors contribute to the failure of our cognitive processes, such as interruptions, distractions, technological errors, and other negative system or environmental factors.[3] Human errors are normal and can happen to anyone. In order to manage a human error, it is recommended that it be settled using Just Culture. This allows the organization to implement or improve system design to make it human error-proof. Discipline may not work in this case, as the error was not intended by the individual. It is common practice and recommended to implement system updates and console the individual in these cases.

At-risk behaviors differ from human errors in the way that individuals do not perceive the risk associated with the choice they made. Or, the individual mistakes the decision that increases risk is okay or not significant.[3] An example of this in pharmacy is bypassing a drug-drug interaction message. A seasoned pharmacist may not look twice into the interaction alert, which can ultimately lead to an adverse event. At-risk behaviors can lead to individuals to perform shortcuts to get through tasks and are "positives" to others, as they were able to accomplish task. Effectively managing this type of behavior involves removing barriers and rewards for at-risk behaviors and coaching the individual to understand that the risk associated with their choices can cause errors. Coaching can often show light to the reasons for deciding to take a shortcut so those can be remedied. This leads to system redesign, as systems can be slowing the process down for an individual, therefore causing them to take shortcuts.

Reckless behavior is considered the only behavior in which punitive discipline may be used. Reckless behavior is when individuals disregard the risk associated with their decision, despite understanding how serious the risk may be. For an individual's behavior to be classified as reckless, it is key that they know and understand the risk is unjustifiable. Typically, the individual is making the decision for their own gain, rather than focusing on the safety of a patient. According to the Just Culture principle, reckless behavior is considered "blameworthy".[3] The action taken against an individual will be then reliant on the policies and procedures of the organization.

Human error and at-risk behavior are examples in which punitive punishment may not be successful. In cases of human error and at-risk behavior, Just Culture principles are encouraged to hold all accountable and improve systems. A person who acts recklessly is consciously choosing to ignore the risk for themselves, therefore punitive punishment is necessary. Utilizing Just Culture principles in an organization will provide light to the technological discrepancies that may lead to errors, therefore giving an opportunity to improve that system.

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