

Patient Safety Bulletin

Interruptions

What happened and what were the issues/implications?

I was in the middle of several jobs, all of which needed my full attention – ordering chemotherapy, reviewing blood results, checking correspondence and then PING! An email arrived. I could tell by the first line what it was going to be about and I knew I would have to read it. It was questioning my interpretation of a recent blood result, implying I had done something wrong for a patient. I remember being angry about this implication as the person emailing me was not aware of the whole situation and they had made a lot of assumptions. I emailed back straightaway with probably a bit of an angry answer.

I then completely lost the thread of what I was doing before and missed the addition of some thromboprophylaxis on a chemotherapy script.

What actions were taken?

The omission was picked up by my pharmacy colleagues. I was able to amend the prescription, so no harm was done.

What did you learn?

If I am doing something that needs my undivided attention, I really should turn off my emails. I am too easily distracted.

I have also learnt that if I feel angry about someone criticising me, then it's a bit of an alert for me to have a think. Someone is actually being very kind and trying to stop me making a mistake. I should be happy, not angry, that they feel comfortable speaking up. I should step back a bit and look at what I might have missed – a result, an opinion, an option. Have I decided prematurely to ignore things that don't appear to back my decision?

I need to make sure people never feel unable to challenge or question me. I think I can do this best by talking, sharing and admitting uncertainties with colleagues both senior and junior.

How was the learning shared?

I teach medical students and junior doctors about all the types of cognitive bias in medicine. You need to be aware of them. (Could you add a sentence to introduce the link below? For example: I supply a link to a journal article below which discusses the concept of cognitive bias and how to correct for it.)

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https://www.rcpe.ac.uk/sites/default/files/jrcpe_48_3_osullivan.pdf

I try and tweet about my learning, too. Writing things down seems to help me remember and learn far more.