



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Telling a Story of Safety: Media and Organizational Discourse on Patient Safety

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Despite evidence that medical harm is prevalent nationwide, experts and advocates struggle to talk about patient safety in a way that has led to widespread support for effective solutions.

Research conducted by FrameWorks Institute on behalf of the Betsy Lehman Center suggests that patient safety issues are not broadly understood, nor is medical harm seen as an important health care concern. To better understand current messaging, researchers analyzed a sample of 431 materials that address patient safety issues, including stories that appeared in the general media and materials developed by patient safety organizations.

In their analysis, researchers identified patterns in framing and storytelling that compete to shape public and health care provider thinking about patient safety. This research underscores a number of important communications challenges for people working to build public will and shift policy and practices to prevent adverse medical events.

Among the findings:

- **Patient safety is not a term that regularly appears in the media** and is seldom defined.
- Media and organizational materials **focus almost exclusively on adverse outcomes for individual patients**; societal consequences are missing.
- **Responsibility for addressing patient safety is dispersed** in media and organizational materials, which ultimately attributes responsibility to no one.
- **Systems-level causes and solutions** are frequently mentioned, but rarely referenced together in a coherent narrative.
- **Media react** to adverse events; **organizations highlight patient activation** as a means of prevention.
- Causes, consequences and solutions to medical harm are **described but seldom explained**.

The analysis points to a number of ways that experts, advocates, and organizations can improve the narrative about the topic of patient safety, including:

- Use the phrase “patient safety” and **leverage the power of repetition**.
- **Tell complete stories** that articulate the causes of and solutions to patient safety.
- **Explain** the role of the health care system in minimizing the risk of harm and empowering patients.

This research, along with previous FrameWorks studies on public perceptions of patient safety, offers a set of evidence-based recommendations for people working to advance the issue. Unless a more visible, more informed conversation on patient safety is cultivated, it will remain difficult to initiate the systemic changes needed to improve health outcomes for all.

The full report is available [here](#) 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.