

Population Health Forum

Improving Patient Safety Through Adaptive Approaches

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Dr. Jeffrey Cohn is President of the Plexus Institute, a non-profit organization whose mission is to “foster the health of individuals, families, communities, and our natural environment by helping people use concepts emerging from the new science of complexity.” Dr. Cohn’s expertise is focused on how to create conditions for the social and cultural improvement work necessary for the most complex and intractable healthcare challenges. Prior to joining Plexus, Dr. Cohn was Chief Quality Officer and Patient Safety Officer for Einstein Healthcare Network where he led an initiative to reduce patient infection rates while working closing with Plexus to help transform the Einstein Network’s approach to patient safety.

Dr. Cohn’s Forum presentation began with a typical patient scenario that he used as an ice-breaker to generate audience discussion. His point in this exercise was to reveal that

different perspectives influence different approaches. When many people come up with the same answer, this is the zone of complexity or adaptive zone. He went on to explain technical versus adaptive work which is based on the book, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* by Ronald Heifetz, MD. The book uses historical events as examples of challenges that move into the realm of adaptive challenges. Though solutions are not known in advance, this framework can be used for the patient safety arena. Cohn described a list of technical and adaptive challenges and emphasized that all approaches have long-term unintended consequences. Over-emphasis on technical approaches, Cohn explained, have little short-term benefit and can even perpetuate or worsen the problem.

Cohn went onto to discuss the Comprehensive Unit-Based Safety

Program (CUSP) model, a 5- step program developed by Johns Hopkins aimed at changing the workplace culture. The elements of the steps include: science of safety training; staff identification of defects; senior executive rounds; and implementation of improvement needs. This model links leadership to frontline roles, by empowering all staff to be involved in the safety of their environment.

Diagnosing the system is a starting point in adaptive patient safety work. Aside from the technical elements, it is important to account for past attempts and understand failures. Cohn emphasized the need for multidisciplinary perspectives and that most change work happens in groups. Cohn summarized his discussion by describing adaptive change patient safety workshops offered by the Plexus Institute. ■