Reducing medical errors - could patients be the missing link

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Despite an increase in patient safety campaigns and awareness, at least one in 10 patients is still at risk of an adverse event in hospital. Patients’ active engagement as members of the healthcare team will improve quality of decision making and reduce medical errors, but there is little robust strategy on driving this concept of “patient-lead care” forward. Furthermore, there are socio-demographic and cultural issues that make patients reluctant to challenge medical staff and take responsibility for their safety, often delegating this to healthcare professionals. Using a revised modified validated questionnaire (Davis et al 2008), we explored patients’ willingness to question healthcare staff about their treatment and medication and their engagement in and sense of responsibility for their own medical care and safety. Likert type scales and visual analogue scores (VAS) were used to collect their responses and data was analysed using non-parametric tests. 100 patients attending a North London teaching hospital completed the questionnaires in this pilot study. Of these, 60% were British born, 60% were women and 20% were tertiary educated. Only 24% familiarised themselves with the hospital websites prior to attending. 80% would query if they felt they had been prescribed the incorrect tablets. Although 76% felt empowered to ask in detail about suggested surgical procedures, only 15% would actively take part in the WHO Surgical Checklist. Interestingly, 90% would not challenge doctors and nurses to ask if they adhered to hand washing protocols and 16% felt they had no responsibility for their safety while in hospital. Fluent English speakers and tertiary educated patients were more likely to feel responsible for their own safety and take an active role. Many patients still do not challenge healthcare professionals regarding safety issues especially when hand washing is concerned. Patients without tertiary education and those who are not fluent in English need to be more empowered to take an active role in their safety.