Patient safety: It’s not rocket science, says ex-astronaut

An astronaut, engineer, pilot and anaesthetist speaking tomorrow (Monday May 6) at a conference of anaesthetists was originally scheduled to be part of the fatal Challenger mission in 1986 and was subsequently part of the team investigating what went wrong.

As a result of that investigation a new escape system was developed for space shuttles. Professor James Bagian, who went on to be part of the first civilian space mission launched after the Challenger in 1989 then travelled into space again in 1991.

“It was not a suicidal gesture, but I knew there was a one in 25 risk that I wouldn’t come back,” he says.

“There is always risk, everything involves risk. The question is, is it a worthwhile risk? What we were achieving was worth the risk we were taking.”

The risk and safety expert will tell a meeting of the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists that adverse events resulting from medical procedures and treatment could be dramatically reduced - and lives saved - with the simplest of changes to everyday processes.

Assessing risk and improving systems and designs to minimise harm to patients in healthcare settings is where Professor Bagian now applies his expertise.

He believes that some of the most profound solutions to seemingly intractable problems are in fact the simplest.

“Progress in eliminating harm from medicine has gone slowly,” Professor Bagian says.

In part, he blames the attention given to the system of “endless reporting and reports” and the false sense of security they give to an organisation rather than expending a similar level of effort to focus on the actions needed to mitigate the underlying causes of patient harm.

“More critical than the reporting system must be the actions that are taken as a result of the information that is gleaned from the reports themselves,” he says.

“The real underlying causes and contributing factors that the report is attempting to address are often never adequately ascertained, resulting in superficial and
functionally ineffective recommendations such as cautioning individuals to be more careful or simply generating new policies."

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