

Contributing to an evidence base to demonstrate the role human factors play in patient safety.

Dr Chris Frerk, consultant anaesthetist, Northampton General Hospital

I have had an interest and research base in airway management for 15 years and have been training individuals and small groups of anaesthetists and lecturing widely in this field for almost as long.

I always believed that anaesthetists must have the technical skills to perform emergency airway access and this formed a core part of my teaching for many years. Over the last 5 or 6 years having heard personal testimonies from anaesthetists involved in cases that did not go well I began to realise that failure to make or delay in making the decision to follow known algorithms was a recurring theme in many instances of poor outcome in emergency airway management.

I have included this (the importance of decision making as well as having the practical skills) in my lectures and training over the last 5 years. Initially I believed that just telling people that the decision making part was as hard as the practical part would help. Although I have gained a personal insight in to this behavioural failing of anaesthetists under stress it's only in last 12 months or so that I have come to understand that the phenomenon is well known in other fields and comes under the umbrella of "Human Factors"

It has led me to find out more about Human factors and to include briefings and improved communications in my own practice in high risk situations. Colleagues in these situations have said that the clarity of communication has been reassuring.

Other lecturers in airway management have expressed "light bulb moments" having heard my lectures explaining the contribution "difficult decision making" makes to poor outcomes. I am sure from the personal testimonies I have heard that human factors have been a significant contributor to poor outcomes – they have not been recorded as such because in general we have not recognised them for what they are at the time.

Chris Frerk