

Cause and Effect (fishbone) diagrams

When undertaking a significant event audit, you may find it useful to use a cause and effect diagram, also known as a fishbone diagram. This is a tool designed to help the team find the possible root cause(s) of a problem. Best done as an exercise involving everyone who is affected or involved in the problem and its dependencies.

Once in a meeting with the team, the following points can be discussed to find any root causes.

1. Identify the problem

Identify the causes by asking the group to ask, “why does this happen?” Think of it from the perspective of all members of the veterinary team, and the client. You can then decide which cause to tackle first. This becomes the head of the fish.

2. Discuss possible major causes

Use the general headings: equipment, material, process, environment, management and people. These become the spines of the fish. All of these headings may not be applicable to the situation, but discussing each one will be beneficial.

3. Discuss each major category

Add the ideas generated. These become the sub-branches.

4. These can be further broken down into contributing factors.

The 5 why strategy can be used with this tool to identify the cause of a particular topic. E.g. Medication was not dispensed to a client

- Why? Client left before it was dispensed and handed to her
- Why? Medication took a while to be dispensed and the client couldn't wait
- Why? There was lots of medication to be prepared and the nurse ran behind

- Why? The nurse was working alone in the pharmacy
- Why? There was reduced staff due to sick leave.

An example of the cause and effect diagram can be seen on the next page, with ‘waiting times’ being used as the problem to be investigated. A template is available for you to get started with your own.



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