UF College of Medicine
Quality and Patient Safety Initiative
UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA

THE 5 WHYS: A QUICK GUIDE TO FINDING THE ROOT CAUSE

What is the "5 Whys?"

A simple, team-based problem-solving technique used to move past surface-level indicators and identify the systemic root cause of an issue by repeatedly asking the question "Why?"

Conducting a 5 Whys Analysis

1. **Assemble the Right Team & Define the Problem:**
   - Gather a small group of people who are familiar with the process you're investigating.
   - Together, agree on a clear, specific, and blame-free problem statement.
2. **Ask "Why?" Repeatedly:**
   - Start with your problem statement and ask, "Why did *this* happen?"
   - Record the answer. This answer then becomes the basis for your next question: "Why did *that* happen?"
   - Continue this process, drilling down with each question. While it's called the "5 Whys," it may take more or fewer questions to get to the core issue.
3. **Identify the Root Cause:**
   - You have likely found the root cause when the answers stop pointing to process issues and start identifying a system level problem or a missing policy. It's often the last "why" in your chain.
4. **Validate Your Finding with the Litmus Test:**
   - Ask your team: If we correct this final cause, can we be confident the original problem will not recur?
     - If the answer is "Yes," you've found your root cause.
     - If it's "No," you may need to dig deeper.

The 5 Whys in Clinical Practice

The following example illustrates the 5 Whys technique applied in a clinical setting.

Problem: A patient received the wrong dose of an antibiotic.

- **Why? #1:** The nurse administered the wrong dose.
- **Why? #2:** The medication was dispensed incorrectly from the cabinet.
- **Why? #3:** The cabinet was restocked with the wrong concentration.
- **Why? #4:** Two look-alike concentrations were stored side-by-side.
- **Root Cause (Why? #5):** No hospital policy exists for separating look-alike, sound-alike medications.

Tips for Success

- **Be a Team Player:** Ensure members of the clinical team representing a variety of roles are present for the discussion.
- **Avoid Blame:** The goal is to analyze a process, not to find fault with an individual.
- **Be Specific:** Base your answers on facts and data, not on assumptions.
- **Know Its Limits:** For highly complex problems with multiple interacting causes, the 5 Whys may be too simple. In that case, consider a more comprehensive tool like a Fishbone Diagram.