What is human factors engineering? (Clue, it's not some ethically dubious genetics experiment)

By: Dr. Shyr Chui

Human Factors Engineering (HFE), also known as ergonomics, is the scientific discipline that studies how humans interact with elements of a system. Its goal is to optimize human well-being and overall system performance by designing systems, tools, environments, and processes that align with human abilities and also their limitations. HFE considers physical, cognitive, and organizational factors for enhancing safety, efficiency, and usability.

Key Principles:
1. User-Centered Design: Focuses on designing systems that meet the needs, abilities, and limitations of the end users.
2. Error Reduction: Identifying potential sources of human error and design systems to prevent or mitigate these errors.
3. Enhancing Usability: Creating interfaces and processes that are intuitive and easy to use.
4. Work Environment Optimization: Designing physical and organizational environments to support human performance and reduce stress.
5. Feedback Loops: Implementing mechanisms for continuous feedback to identify issues and improve system design.

How can we apply this in Healthcare Systems?

1. Design of Medical Devices and Equipment:
   -Usability Testing: Ensuring that medical devices are intuitive and easy to operate reduces the risk of user error.
   - Standardization: Standardizing device interfaces and controls can minimize confusion and improve safety.

2. Electronic Health Records (EHR) Systems:
   - Interface Design: Creating user-friendly interfaces for EHR systems that reduce cognitive load and streamline data entry can improve clinician efficiency and reduce errors.

- Alert Fatigue: Designing intelligent alert systems that prioritize critical alerts and minimize unnecessary notifications to reduce clinician fatigue.

3. Workflow and Process Design:
- Process Mapping: Analyzing and redesigning workflows to eliminate bottlenecks and improve efficiency.
- Communication Protocols: Developing clear communication protocols to ensure accurate and timely information transfer between healthcare providers.

4. Patient Safety:
- Error Prevention: Identifying potential blind spots in patient care processes and implementing design changes to prevent safety events.
- Human Error Analysis: Using root cause analysis to understand why errors occur and how system design can be improved to prevent them.

5. Training and Simulation:
- Simulated Environments: Creating realistic simulation environments for training healthcare providers on new devices, systems, and protocols.
- Team Training: Enhancing team coordination and communication through team training exercises.

6. Physical Environment Design:
- Ergonomic Workspaces: Designing workspaces that reduce physical strain and support efficient workflows.
- Environmental Factors: Optimizing lighting, noise levels, and layout to support healthcare providers' performance and patient comfort.

Examples in Practice:

- Checklists and Protocols: The implementation of checklists for surgical procedures, inspired by aviation industry practices, to ensure all necessary steps are completed and reduce the risk of complications.
- Smart Infusion Pumps: Infusion pumps designed with safety features such as dose error reduction systems to prevent medication errors.
- Design of Operating Rooms: Configuring operating rooms to minimize movement and optimize access to necessary equipment and supplies.
-Clinical Decision Tools: Maintains quality practice and eases cognitive load for clinical decision making.

By applying HFE principles, healthcare systems can improve the safety, efficiency, and satisfaction of both patients and healthcare providers. The goal is to create environments where human performance is supported, errors are minimized, and quality care is delivered consistently.

Shyr Chui

Still Interested in how human factors engineering can improve patient safety? Try these:

Karsh BT, Holden RJ, Alper SJ, Or CK. A human factors engineering paradigm for patient safety: designing to support the performance of the healthcare professional. Qual Saf Health Care. 2006 Dec;15 Suppl 1(Suppl 1): i59-65. doi: 10.1136/qshc.2005.015974. PMID: 17142611; PMCID: PMC2464866.

Gosbee J. Human factors engineering and patient safety. Qual Saf Health Care. 2002 Dec;11(4):352-4. doi: 10.1136/qhc.11.4.352. PMID: 12468696; PMCID: PMC1758019.