Lesson 1: Two Mustangs

- Even though health care is unique, there are still many lessons – about reliability, agility, and problem solving – that organizations can learn from other high-risk industries, such as automobiles and aviation, which focus on safety and continuous improvement.
- In any complex system (health care or otherwise), the large number of interlocking parts (people, processes, departments, materials, etc.) makes it almost impossible to design the system perfectly the first time around.
  - In other words, you can’t think your way to perfect care by creating a neat design on paper.
  - You have to discover your way to perfect care after you see how the design works in practice and continuously improve it.
  - We must keep getting better and better if we’re to have any chance at delivering affordable, high-quality care to all patients.

Lesson 2: How to Make Complex Systems Fail

- The case of Mrs. Grant shows us what can happen when many small hazards come together to create one enormous hazard.
- The little problems that crop up in our daily routine become so familiar that we start assuming they’re completely normal. This tendency is called “normalizing deviance.”
  - These little problems are “weak signals” that the system isn’t working the way it should. These problems can combine in ways that can be deadly for patients; it’s essential to call them out and work to fix them.

Lesson 3: Solving Problems in Complex Systems

- It’s very important that organizations have a deliberate and reliable way of responding to concerns and “weak signals” workers raise.
- Here are the conditions that allow staff members to escalate problems effectively. If these conditions are in place, organizations have a better chance of seeing and solving problems before they have a chance to result in harm:
  - The people doing work must recognize they have a problem.
  - Someone must be responsible for solving that problem.
  - The people doing work must be able to notify the responsible person in a timely way.
  - The responsible person must show up without blame and with a desire to solve the problem collaboratively.
  - There must be enough time and resources to solve the problem.
- Here’s an example to illustrate the importance of these five conditions: The issue is a missing nursing gown. Without a new gown in each room, it is easier to transfer infections. In order to address the problem:
  - The nurse had to recognize that the missing gown was a problem, rather than a normal condition of work.
  - The organization had to have designated a person (Mary) with the span of responsibility to deal with that problem.
The nurse had to be able to reach Mary right away.
Mary had to respond with concern and openness.
Several people involved in the process of distributing and using gowns had to be given enough time to meet and talk over the problem.

- If organizations reliably provide these conditions, they make it possible for staff to report many small problems – which can lead to the resolution of big problems in the future.