Effective board governance of safe care: a (theoretically underpinned) cross-sectioned examination of the breadth and depth of relationships through national quantitative surveys and in-depth qualitative case studies

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Authors' objectives
Recent high-profile reports into serious failings in the quality of hospital care in the NHS raise concerns over the ability of trust boards to discharge their duties effectively. Our study aimed to generate theoretically grounded empirical evidence on the associations between board governance, patient safety processes and patient-centred outcomes. The specific aims were as follows: (1) to identify the types of governance activities undertaken by hospital trust boards in the English NHS with regard to ensuring safe care in their organisation; (2) in foundation trusts, to explore the role of boards and boards of governors with regards to the oversight of patient safety in their organisation; (3) to assess the association between particular hospital trust board oversight activities and patient safety processes and clinical outcomes; (4) to identify the facilitators and barriers to developing effective hospital trust board governance of safe care; and (5) to assess the impact of external commissioning arrangements and incentives on hospital trust board oversight of patient safety.

Authors' conclusions
Our research is the first large-scale mixed-methods study of hospital board activity and behaviour related to the oversight of patient safety in the English NHS and the key findings should be used to influence the design of future governance arrangements as well as the training and support of board. Our finding that board governance/competencies appear to be linked to staff feeling safe to raise concerns about patient safety issues, and also their confidence that their organisation would address their concern, is worthy of further and more sustained exploration, particularly in the context of the current focus on improving whistleblowing policies in the NHS.

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