

Americans more afraid of medical errors than plane crashes

Considering the number of patients who die or are injured each year by medical errors, it's not surprising that people are more concerned about the safety of medical care than they are about flying on an airplane.

That's the conclusion of a new survey of Americans conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation and the Agency for Health Care Research and Quality (AHRQ).

An overwhelming majority of the 2,000 people who participated in the survey said that information about medical errors (71%) and malpractice suits (70%) would be the biggest factors in helping them determine the quality of providers.

The survey also showed that, although most Americans get their health coverage through the work place, six in ten do not believe employers are a trusted source of information on quality of providers.

"Media attention to the Institute of Medicine story has propelled the problem of medical errors to the forefront in just a short period of time," said Drew Altman, Ph.D., president of the Kaiser Family Foundation.

Despite the increased role of the Internet in information gathering of all kinds, according to the survey, few people are currently going online to find information about the quality of providers, and few trust health websites to provide accurate information.

Instead, people think the government should be providing the information. Seventy-three percent said that the government should require health care providers to report all serious medical errors and to make sure this information is publicly available, versus 21% who say that this type of reporting should be voluntary in order to ensure the privacy of patients and medical staff.

Furthermore, more than six in ten believe there is a role for government in promoting, monitoring and providing information about the quality of doctors, hospitals and health plans: 28% said that the government should just work with providers to improve quality, 21% said that the government should go further and penalize providers that fail to meet standards, and 12% said that the government should just make sure information is available.

Findings from this survey were presented December 11, 2000 at a conference in Bethesda, Maryland, entitled "Informing Consumers About Health Care Quality," sponsored in part by AHRQ.

SOURCE: "Medical Errors and Malpractice, Public's Top Measures of Health Care Quality," Agency for Health Care Research and Quality, Dec. 2000.