

Health care's deadly secret: Accidents routinely happen

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Walter Nawracay died after brain surgery.

The Medical College of Pennsylvania Hospital is a typical teaching hospital. It is known for cutting-edge research programs, for training medical students and newly graduated doctors, and for providing advanced medical care.

It is also representative of modern American hospitals in another respect: In the last decade alone, records show, hundreds of MCP Hospital patients have been seriously injured, and at least 66 have died after medical mistakes.

The hospital's internal records cite 598 incidents reported by medical professionals to the hospital administration in the last decade. In some of those cases, patients or survivors were never told that the injuries were caused by medical errors. None of the doctors involved in the incidents was subjected to disciplinary action.

For patients of all ages, serious injury and death caused by medical errors are well-known facts of life in the medical community. But they are rarely reported to the general public.

MCP Hospital's records came to light only because of bankruptcy proceedings last year, when its new owner publicly filed a detailed account of the 598 incidents reported at the facility from January 1989 through June 1998.

Those numbers mirror what is happening across the country. Lucian Leape, a Harvard University professor who conducted the most comprehensive study of medical errors in the United States, has estimated that one million patients nationwide are injured by errors during hospital treatment each year and that 120,000 die as a result.

That number of deaths is the equivalent of what would occur if a jumbo jet crashed every day; it is three times the 43,000 people killed each year in U.S. automobile accidents.

"It's by far the number one problem" in health care, said Leape, an adjunct professor of health policy at the **Harvard School of Public Health**.

In their study, Leape and his colleagues examined patient records at hospitals throughout the state of New York. Their 1991 report found that **one of every 200 patients admitted to a hospital died as a result of a hospital error.**

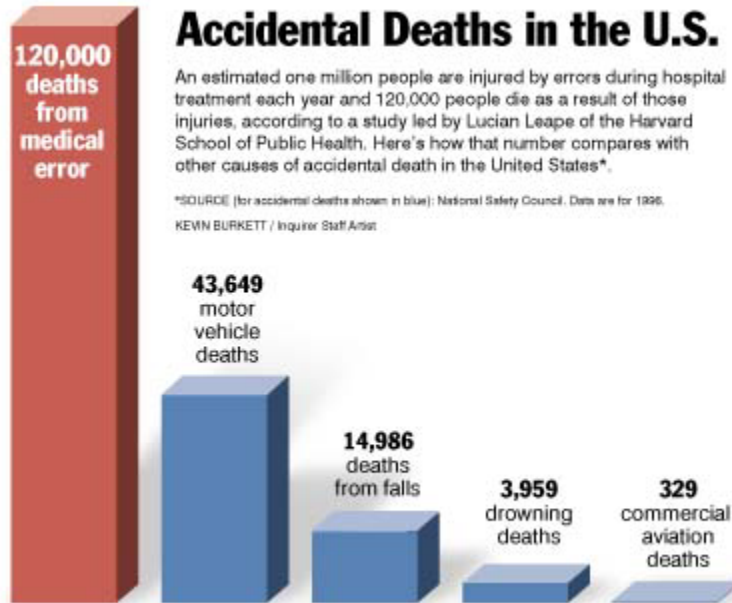
Researchers such as Leape say that not only are medical errors not reported to the public, but those reported to hospital authorities represent roughly 5 to 10 percent of the number of actual medical mistakes at a typical hospital.

"**The bottom line is we have a system that is terribly out of control,**" said Robert Brook, a professor of medicine at the University of California at Los Angeles. "It's really a joke to worry about the

occasional plane that goes down when we have thousands of people who are killed in hospitals every year."

Brook's recognition of the extent of hospital errors is shared by many of medicine's leaders.

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If You Go to the Hospital

■ **Try to avoid going alone.** A friend or relative is legally permitted to accompany you 24 hours a day, as long as they do not hinder the ability to provide your care.

■ **Check all medications that come to your bedside,** including the color, size, and any changes you notice. Don't be afraid to ask your nurse about each medication being given. If anything is different, ask why the prescription was changed and who ordered the change.

■ **Make sure that staff members who come in contact with you wash their hands** or change their gloves when they visit you. As many as half of hospital-acquired infections may be due to staff not washing their hands.

■ **Monitor your catheter two or three times daily** to make sure that it is draining properly. Malfunctioning catheters can be

a source of hospital-acquired infections.

■ **Inspect surgical wounds** and make sure the dressings are changed regularly. If you notice oozing or color changes, don't hesitate to inform a nurse.

■ **Question personnel who transport you** or perform any tests, such as blood tests or X-rays. Ask why they are conducting the test and how often it needs to be done.

■ **Ask your nurse to review your previous day's medical record** with you every morning. Check that diagnoses reflect what your doctor has told you and that doctors' visits, tests and medications are accurately documented.

■ **If in doubt, seek an independent second opinion** at another institution. Use your mouth. You don't have to be obnoxious but you can be forthright. People who speak up tend to get the best care.

SOURCE: *Take This Book to the Hospital With You*, by Charles Inlander of the People's Medical Society.

