

# High-Tech Cure for Medical Mistakes

Imagine that we had an airline crash every day, taking the lives of more than 250 Americans. The country would be outraged, the president would be demanding action, and Congress would be passing emergency legislation. And yet a tragedy of similar proportions is occurring right now in American hospitals.

As many as 98,000 people are needlessly dying in our hospitals every year because of inappropriate medical treatment, according to the report "To Err Is Human" by the Institute of Medicine (IOM). The number of people who die every day in hospitals because of inappropriate medicine is double the number who died in last week's Concorde crash.

The time has come for Congress and the president to act on behalf of all Americans. It is time to stop defending inefficiency and to drag health care into the 21st century by insisting on modern management and information systems.

According to IOM's initial report, inappropriate medical treatment is the fifth leading cause of death in the United States. And that number does not include deaths resulting from home care, ambulatory care or outpatient visits, those that occur in nursing homes or those at patients' homes after they have received inappropriate care in the hospital.

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A new poll from the nonprofit National Patient Safety Foundation (NPSF) finds that 42 percent of people say they've been affected by physician errors, either directly or through a friend or relative. If the survey of roughly 1,500 people accurately represents the general public, it could mean that more than 100 million Americans have experience with medical mistakes.

More alarming, according to the survey, is the fact that in one out of three cases the error permanently harmed the patient's health.

The problem, said Dr. Lucian Leape of the Harvard School of Public Health, is not incompetence. "Bad doctors are 1 percent of the problem at most," he said at a press conference Thursday. "The rest of it is just good people who make mistakes."

## Wrong Diagnosis, Treatment

Leape is a board member of the NPSF, which was founded by the American Medical Association in June of this year to improve health care safety. AMA leaders say it's time to bring the issue out into the open, rather than living in constant fear that any admission of error will launch a flood of malpractice lawsuits.

Leape's own research has shown that the tally of medical mistakes made each year could reach 3 million, with total costs as high as \$200 billion.

The survey found that 40 percent of the people who had experienced a medical mistake pointed to misdiagnoses and wrong treatments as the problem. Medication errors accounted for 28 percent of mistakes. And 22 percent of respondents reported slip-ups during medical procedures.

Half of the errors occurred in hospitals, and 22 percent in doctors' offices.

## What Causes Errors

When asked what may have caused their doctors to make such errors, patients cited carelessness, stress, faulty training and bad communication. Three out of four believe the best solution to the

problem would be to bar health care workers with bad track records.

But Leape disagreed, arguing that punishment simply encourages people to cover up their errors. "We need to shift emphasis away from individuals," he said. "Errors are not the disease, they're the symptoms of the disease."

Instead, he said, poorly designed health care systems may be largely to blame. Doctors and nurses often work double shifts, making them more prone to error. And in this age of computer technology, Leape noted, the hand-written drug prescription should be a relic of the past.

In fact, prescription errors may be among the easiest to avoid. Within five years, most hospitals, clinics and pharmacies should be using computerized drug tracking programs that allow a doctor or pharmacist to know exactly what drug is being called for. Bad penmanship should not be a risk factor for patients.

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## **Medical mistakes: A legal and ethical dilemma for doctors and patients**

May 1, 2000

Web posted at: 8:41 a.m. EDT (1241 GMT)

By CNN & Time Producer Ken Shiffman

Ask John Hawley about medical mistakes, and he'll tell you how he lost half a lung to a misdiagnosis of cancer. Ask his wife, and she'll tell you about the fear that she felt through the ordeal. They'll both tell you they were stunned that his doctors never told them about the mistake.



**John Hawley had surgery in late January of 1998**

Experts say medical mistakes occur all the time, and doctors often fail to tell patients about them. **A recent report estimates that up to 98,000 patients a year die from medical errors.**

Hawley, a retiree from the U.S. Navy, went into surgery in late January 1998 at Lawnwood Regional Medical Center in Fort Pierce, Florida. Half of one lung was cut out, and tissue was sent to the pathology lab for a follow-up analysis.

For the year following the surgery, the Hawleys say they lived in fear, worrying that John's cancer might reoccur. The Hawleys say they were astonished to find out that allegedly the doctors had known, but had not told them, that the post-surgery pathology lab analysis had revealed that Hawley apparently had been misdiagnosed with cancer.

"I was tickled to death for about 30 seconds," says Hawley, "then I got really mad, figured that I went through all of this pain and been drug through everything, and back for appointments to see the people who done it, and they never mentioned a word to me. And I was pretty mad."

Hawley is suing Lawnwood hospital and some of its doctors. All the defendants declined to comment, citing the lawsuit.