



When It Comes to Your Health . . . What You Can Do to Help Prevent Possible Medical Mistakes

Most medical mistakes can be attributed to our complex health care system or breakdowns in communication – patient to physician, physician to pharmacist, nurse to doctor. Most of them include misdiagnoses and improper or incomplete treatment.

In 2001 the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) reported that 44,000 to 98,000 people die in American hospitals each year as the result of medical errors. A research study by the Institute of Medicine, entitled “To Err is Human”, says there are more deaths due to medical errors in our nation than motor vehicle accidents, breast cancer or AIDS.

A broad range of government agencies and health care providers are identifying causes and proposing solutions to this problem – for example, the National Academy for State Health Policy (NASHP) has published a workbook for state governments to build mandatory reporting systems for medical errors.

Also, Carolyn M. Clancy, MD, Director, AHRQ, the world’s leading funder of patient safety research, testified in June 2003 before a Senate subcommittee that, “Over the last 3 years . . . AHRQ has dedicated \$165 million to patient safety research.” AHRQ developed a Patient Safety Improvement Corps to provide technical assistance to states, local governments and health care institutions to reduce medical errors. The agency is also funding grants to help hospitals assess and implement safe practices. And to improve communication, reporting and understanding of medical errors, AHRQ developed a website (<http://webmm.ahrq.gov>) that contains five new cases a month, submitted anonymously where professionals discuss causes and prevention.

While the federal government is busy trying to reduce medical errors, what can individuals do to protect themselves right now?

Six Ways “I” Can Protect Myself

AARP suggests working in partnership with your health professional to prevent medical errors. The most important thing you can do is become “an active member of your health care team”. **Involvement** is the key, as well as these steps:

Inform – your healthcare providers about your prescription and non-prescription medications, vitamins and herbs. Also inform them of symptoms, allergies and adverse reactions to medications in the past, even if it seems unrelated.

Inquire – ask what your prescribed medications are for, possible side effects, if the medication is safe to take with other medications and supplements. Keep asking until you get answers that you understand.

Investigate – your own condition. Contact disease specific organizations, other medical professionals and research online.

In writing – Request copies of lab reports and make sure you understand the directions on the medication label. Write down questions in preparation for your next visit.

Impose - your own best interest. If you are comfortable doing so, ask a family member or friend to be at the hospital or in the doctor’s office with you as an advocate and extra pair of eyes and ears to help ensure that communications are clear and the best care is given.

For more information, visit:

National Academy for State Health Policy
www.nashp.org

Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality
www.ahrq.gov/qual/errorsix.htm

AARP Health Guide
www.aarp.org/health/healthguide

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