

STUDY ON DEATH DUE TO MEDICAL ERRORS 'FLAWED'

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In a recent *Courier Journal* editorial, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich stated that many people die each year due to medical errors and that such errors can be prevented by technological advances such as computerized prescriptions and medical records. He cited a recent study published by the Institute of Medicine (IOM), which calculated that some 98,000 people die each year from medical errors.

While the initial release of the IOM report caused widespread discussion about patient safety, other published studies have shown the IOM findings to be flawed. A recent study conducted by scientists at the Regenstrief Institute and the University of Indiana found the conclusions of the IOM report to be highly exaggerated. The Regenstrief report said that the high estimates of deaths assumed that every time someone died and a medical error had occurred, the error was the cause of death. It found that not to be the case.

Whatever the extent of the problem, Mr. Gingrich believes that most medical errors can be prevented by new technology and does not understand why such technology is not being used now. Unfortunately, technology does not solve all problems. The day that everyone will have an electronic medical record carried in a card like those used in ATMs will surely come. But it hasn't come yet. Such technology is being accepted very slowly for a variety of reasons. Hospitals do not all use the same system, for instance. While physicians in one area may be able to use such technology, physicians in other areas may not. Hospitals, nursing homes, and physicians in rural areas also may not have the resources or personnel to use such technology.

While views differ about the extent of the problem and the solutions to it, the fact that medical errors do occur should be addressed. But what should be done? One solution contained in the IOM report that has not

been discredited is the idea of tort reform. The threat of litigation can deter those in the medical industry from reporting errors and learning from mistakes. The IOM report says that “[p]atient safety is also hindered through the liability system and the threat of malpractice, which discourages the disclosure of errors. The discoverability of data under legal proceedings encourages silence about errors committed or observed.”

Changing the liability system is a good start toward greater patient safety, but it is not a fix-all for this problem. Educating caregivers, as well as patients, about avoidable problems is one of the most important things that should be done. The Kentucky Medical Association has undertaken such an initiative by forming a Patient Safety Task Force with other groups including

hospitals, nurses, the medical schools, and other health care providers. The Task Force is in the process of developing materials that physicians, hospitals, and patients can use to help them avoid medical errors. Patients are encouraged to take advantage of such educational opportunities so they can take charge of their own health.

The information age has brought a great deal of change to our society. But that change has not been that technology solves all of our problems – the change has been that people now have the ability to control many more aspects of their lives. Having more control over their medical treatment is one example. We should take advantage of this fact and educate the public on issues rather than depend solely on palm pilots to solve our problems.

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